

BEHOLD THIS DREAMER!

FULTON OURSLER



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BEHOLD THIS DREAMER



"I think clothes are immoral and disgusting," said Charley quietly.

BEHOLD THIS DREAMER!

BY
FULTON OURSLER

ILLUSTRATED BY
FRANK TENNEY JOHNSON
AND
DELOS PALMER, JR.

"And Joseph dreamed a dream, and he told it to his brethren: and they hated him yet the more.

"And they saw him afar off and before he came near unto them, and they conspired against him to slay him.

"And they said one to another, Behold this dreamer cometh!

"Come now therefore, and let us slay him, and cast him into one of the pits, and we will say, An evil beast hath devoured him: and we shall see what will become of his dreams!"

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W.B.

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TO MY THREE

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Ballade of the Golden Aphrodite

When I no more upon the passing street
Shall mark fair faces as they blossom by,
And my dulled heart no more the faster beat
For invitation of a laughing eye,
Heedless of lunar breast and queenly thigh,
And witchcraft hair down-fallen—ah! then, mighty
Implacable queen, 'tis best that I should die,
When I forget thee, golden Aphrodite.

When all the honey that was once so sweet
Tempts me no more, and, unobservant, I
Pass through the flowering throng on leaden feet,
That once were winged as Mercury's to fly,
Questing like hawk down-swooping from the sky,
A lord of loving unashamed—ah! mighty
Implacable queen, 'tis best that I should die,
When I forget thee, golden Aphrodite.

Yea! bring the funeral coins, the winding sheet,
And the plumed hearse, and mournful threnody
Of dark drums rolling for my sore defeat,
Let me no longer live when I deny
Desire, and burn no more, nor glorify
Love's wildness and its wonder—then, ah! mighty
Implacable queen, 'tis best that I should die,
When I forget thee, golden Aphrodite.

ENVOL

Implacable Queen, let me sepulchred lie,
When woman shall not any more delight me,
Nor even Helen's self provoke a sigh,
When I forget thee, golden Aphrodite.

RICHARD LE GALLIENNE.

The above verses are inscribed with
deep admiration to Fulton Oursler,
with whose "Behold this Dreamer!"
they are to have the honour of associa-
tion.
R. Le G.

BEHOLD THIS DREAMER

CHAPTER ONE

A GOOD, HARD-WORKING WOMAN

CLARA TURNER was getting a sick headache.

In a woman of Clara's temperament, a sick headache may be the prelude to unimaginable disaster. The throbbing pain at her temples, the tired ache in her back and thighs, the goading necessity of household drudgery which cannot be left undone, the consuming poison of fatigue, may impel her finally to a step of decision.

Both sides of the family were agreed that Clara was a good Christian woman. Even Charley's mother admired her patience. When she was raising Charley, she often remarked, she never could stand him the way Clara stood him. The wonder was that Clara retained so much cheerfulness. She had not been raised to housework. Before marriage, her life had been quite different.

But to-day Clara was getting a sick headache. It was Wednesday, which was ironing day. In the kitchen, Clara had laid out her ironing board, wrapped around with discarded bed-sheets, between the table and the back of an unpainted old chair. Over the board she was bent, moving a black iron forward and backward, in a jerky rhythm of fomenting discontent. She muttered to herself as she pressed the hot bottom of the iron against the starched fronts of Charley's shirts. On the gas stove, two other irons were heating above the humming circles of blue and yellow flames.

The atmosphere was humid and warm. Clara's waist had worked free from the confinement of her skirt, now to bulge blowzily and without dignity behind her. In unkempt spin-dles her hair protruded. Her cheeks were a dark, wet yellow, and globules of perspiration gleamed above her eyes and on the exposed skin of her chest.

Her brows were drawn together in a hurt jumble; in her eyes lay a haunted and wounded glitter; a fire like the slowly flaming fuse of a cracker that will presently go off.

With the black iron lifted in her hand, she paused in her labor. There was a moment of irresolution; then came a decision.

She put the iron on the back of the stove, banging it down heavily against the grilled tracery, thick with grease. She sucked her teeth against her lips vindictively, as she turned out the gas under the heating irons. She muttered words that were like a malediction, as her nervous fingers thrust back the edges of her waist within her skirt. Carelessly, and with a thoughtless fury, she jabbed back the truant strands of her hair.

Without a hat, she left the house. Hurrying down the white marble steps, she rushed around the block to a corner drug store, where there was a telephone booth.

"Give me St. Paul 87542" she bade the operator.

A woman's voice, loftily cool and efficient, replied.

"I want to speak to Mr. Stricker," demanded Clara peremptorily.

"This is Mr. Stricker's secretary. Who is it wants to speak with him, please?"

"His daughter."

"Mrs. Turner or Miss Cissie?"

"Mrs. Turner."

"Oh! Just a minute, Mrs. Turner, and I'll see if he can be disturbed!"

A man's round, bushy voice, rotund with importance, came a moment later and shouted:

"Helloa, Clara! What's the matter?"

"Pop, can you come over to the house to-night?"

"I don't know. What for?"

"I want to have a talk with you, pop. I've just got to have a talk with you!"

"Why—what about?"

"About Charley."

"Oh!"

"There's got to be something done with Charley. He can't go on the way he is. I just can't stand this kind of life any longer. I just can't, pop!"

"Well! Look here, Clara. You know I don't believe in meddling. You went your own way when you married him. I told you then, you know——"

"Don't throw that up to me. Something's got to be done."

"But what can I do? I've given him a job in this plant. What else can I do?"

"Come over to the house to-night, pop!"

"Well, you know your Cousin Elsie is visiting us for a few days. I'll have to bring your mom, and her, and Cissie with me. I'd have to do that."

"Well, we can send them out for a walk in Lafayette Square," decided Clara, desperately firm. "I've just got to do something!"

"All right, Clara. We'll all get there about seven o'clock. How are you feeling?"

"I've got a sick headache," replied Clara dully, and hung up the receiver.

Charley Turner, Clara's husband, was a clerk in the accounting Department of the Atlass Brush Manufacturing Company, of which his father-in-law, John Stricker, was the owner.

At the time that his wife and his father-in-law were conversing over the telephone, Charley should have been making out bills.

Instead, he was balancing a window-pole on the edge of his chin, juggling two oranges meanwhile with his hands.

Clara and Charley Turner, with all their relatives, lived in a certain Eastern city that is shaped as an oyster. It is a city without fancy; an oyster without its pearl. "Wake up!" it cries to the populace.

To keep awake is a passion of its people. Every man must be wide awake. Every shoulder must be lifted against the wheel, excepting only the overseers. Their duty it is to cry "Wake up," and to keep on crying "Wake up," and to urge on the shoulders that are lifted against the wheel.

Flung from its crosses, steeples and towers are new banners; the flaunting banderoles of aroused and awakened progress. Of old, the city had among its dwellers wise men who wished to dream. But all the wise men have been buried now, and all the dreamers have been awakened to the plans and program of the Indian Club.

It is a city of organized alarm clocks. Everybody belongs to something, the purpose of which is to arouse somebody. It is not respectable not to belong to something. One must first be a member in good standing of a recognized church, and, after that, a Rotarian, if possible. If not possible, then there are neighborhood improvement associations, welfare organizations, ten thousand four hundred and two of them, all determined to see that the city is kept wide awake.

Red-blooded, two-fisted, meat-eating, God-fearing he-men and she-women pay their taxes. Their fealty is to God, State, and Institution. After that, they are virulently patriotic toward their native city. They love it with a most surprising and practical intensity. Not for the things which the dead

wise men cherished it do they kindle, but for new things which they can see and understand.

They are indifferent to the red cenotaph of its ancient shot tower, but they pay a strange reverence to a yellow and ghastly minaret, raised in the chief market place, because perched upon its peak is an immense blue and white patent medicine bottle, revolving day and night, its thousands of electric bulbs visible in the darkness, far out of the harbor, into the careless bay, even beyond the gray and green sentinel post of Fort Carroll.

Its dreamers are buried obscurely. It is better to forget them, for some of them drank too much. In the blatant public square, at its proudest street crossings, however, they have fixed a proper monument. In marble and bronze it bleats the virtues of a fellow who was for a few years president of a jerk-water railroad upstate.

The art gallery is open a few hours a day, a very few days a year. But its harbor is wide open every moment to the heavily laden ships from everywhere.

It is an old place, this town, with traditions wrought in the exquisite textures of courage and faith. But now it has lost its ancient virtue; it has rouged its cheeks, hennaed its tresses, touched its lashes with mascara, and taken to flirting on street corners.

In brief, it is an American Eastern city—old enough to know better, but young enough to pawn its mortal soul.

The company gathered in the parlor of Charley and Clara Turner's house, that sultry night in July, fanned themselves with dried palm leaves, given away as premiums in a popular tea and coffee shop. Thousands like them were at the same hour sitting in their own parlors, cooling themselves with identical fans, distributed by the same shop. The Turners and the Strickers were typical families. Nearly all of them had been born within the oysterish outline of the city, except

old John Stricker himself, who had come into the world in Talbott County.

Most of them had never crossed the boundaries of the city. It is not a traveler's town. They prided themselves, all of them, on being like everyone else. "Typical" was a word of praise, used with unctuous pride at the annual banquets of the Old Town Merchants and Manufacturers Association.

On this muggy night, typical families all over the city were engaged in typical relaxation. Thousands of relatives were visiting thousands of other relatives, sitting in the front parlors, just as the Turners and Strickers were sitting in the front parlor of Charley and Clara. Others were down on an excursion. Across the patient green waters of the Bay, the steamer *Louise* was grinding its way back to the Light Street Wharf. Straw hat factory girls and cotton duck mill hands were dancing and mooning upon its worn decks, not bothering to remember that their grandfathers and grandmothers had danced under the same moon, over the same waters, and on the same smelly old boat.

In Druid Hill Park, the Town Band was playing the *Beautiful Blue Danube*, to a wide encircling audience on benches and the grass—an audience of Baltimore and Ohio Railroad clerks, Gardiner Dairy truck drivers, Johns Hopkins Hospital nurses, and hungry college professors. At Bay Shore, Riverview, and other summer resorts, there was eating, dancing, flirting; angry old women, giggling youngsters, boisterous and pimply young men.

The wheels were not revolving, for it was night. The sore shoulders were at rest. The people were trying to forget. The voices of the overseers were silenced until the morrow, when, like Muezzins from a tower in Asia, they would howl to the mob:

"*Wake up! Wake up! Wake up!*"

All day long the bare flesh of blistered shoulders had been

lifted against the hard steel of the wheel's rims. The factory looms had whizzed and groaned and roared. The hearts of the toilers had sickened with the monotony of the work and the continual call of the overseers.

When the last whistle was blown, the toilers had poured out of the gates and hurried home. They lived among stretches, vast, interminable, monotonous, of tiny red and yellow brick houses. The bricks were all penciled out meticulously in white mortar, made utterly distinct, so that the front walls of the houses were like giant checker boards. Before each house was a set of white marble steps, quarried from Ellicott City. Each window had its lace curtains, its brazen urn from Eisenberg's, and its jaded, wilted fern.

It was a miracle how a man could tell his own house from the hundred thousand others just like it.

Charley Turner rented just such a house, up in the north-western part of the city, once a respectable neighborhood, but now blackened and degraded by an invasion of negroes.

In these later times it had become a nondescript neighborhood of intermingling negroes, poor whites, and proud old families too lazy to move out. It was not far from Pennsylvania Avenue, the long, dark highway of "colored" shops and eating places, but it was also near to Lafayette Square and to Harlem Park, with its mild, sunken grasses, flower beds and limping little fountain. Among miles of moldering old houses lived Clara and Charley; mansions of a sturdier period, falling apart; among dark alleys, where savage black faces gleamed under the street lamps; a region of rolling whites of watchful eyes, the secret click of juggled dice, the angry flash of razor steel, and the shrill billingsgate of wenches quarreling over sticky brats.

People wondered how long Charley and Clara were going to live up that way. They reckoned rent was just as cheap down in the Southwestern part of the city, or over by Clifton

Park. They knew Charley didn't make much. He had lost every job he ever got, until he married Clara Stricker. Then Clara's father gave him a job with the Atlass Brush Company. They all knew that old John Stricker kept Charley on only because it would be too expensive to fire him; the old man would have to support Clara and Charley both.

Her disgust of the "nigger street" on which she lived was one of the irritations which helped Clara's sick headache along. When the time arrived to expect the visit of her folks, she was still undecided just what, or how much, she would tell her father about Charley. What she really wanted was an outlet, and then consolation.

She was that kind of woman. Consolation helped her, invariably. She warmed and grew strong under pity. She pitied herself and liked others to pity her. In this she felt an exalted righteousness, for she knew perfectly well how deserving of pity she was, with a husband like Charley.

Clara was short, with rather a dingy figure. Her face was not without intelligence, of a shrewd order, and before marriage she had been as pretty as the best of the young shoppers on Charles and Lexington Streets. Like most girls who ate the fresh vegetables from the Eastern Shore, and the fishes, crabs and oysters from the salt water of the Bay, she had a fresh, vital bloom. Her eyes were brightly green, and formerly her cheeks were glowing with the cerise tints of good health; her lips, too; and her hair was incorrigibly wavy, in spite of the damp mists which rose from the grumbling waters of the Patapsco.

Marriage and hard work had struck her with contemptuous hands. Every morning she cleaned house; its rooms were immaculate; she performed its sweepings and dustings and scrubbings with the passionate devotion of a temple virgin. To be a good housewife was one of the typical virtues of the town. Especially did she keep the front marble steps clean;

she scrubbed them as if the water in her galvanized iron bucket were lustral, and blessed with the benediction of a priest. With the bucket and a scrub brush, she appeared "out front" as soon as Charley was off to work, before the breakfast dishes were washed. She got down on her knees twice a day and scrubbed those steps, so that the white marble glistened like snow. It was necessary to clean them twice, because the hucksters, insurance collectors, mail man and others who called dirtied them with their careless feet.

She did her own family wash. She cooked all her meals. Of her, it was said that she was typical; a good wife, hard-working, industrious, clean, loyal, Christian.

CHAPTER TWO

THE MAN UPSTAIRS

THEY were all there—Clara's mother, and Clara's father, and Clara's sister, and Clara's brother, and Clara's Cousin Elsie.

Also, Charley's mother was there; Charley's mother, who was a widow, and lived on Pitcher Street; she had dropped in most inopportunely.

Clara and Charley's mother never got on.

It was dark in the front parlor. On summer evenings it was the custom to sit in the dark and converse. The green posted oil lamp on the corner of the alley outside gave a feeble yellow glare through the open, unscreened window.

Most families sat out on the white marble front steps, often dragging out rocking chairs from the parlor, and spreading themselves over the sidewalk. Many of the families on the block where Charley and Clara lived were doing so now, and there was considerable interchange of visits. Up and down the streets an irregular procession passed; women on their way to the movies, or enjoying the less costly relaxation of "taking a walk around the block." Some of them carried pitchers and glass bowls in their hands; they were on their way to a bakery up the street a few "squares," where ice cream was sold at thirty-five cents a quart.

From the open window of a house across the street came the strains of a phonograph; a record of Homer Rodeheaver, singing "Brighten the Corner Where You Are." In another house, a group of old men and women were gathered around an ancient Estey cottage organ, singing in cracked voices a

camp-meeting tune. Blacks were bawling curses in the dirty alley behind the houses, obscenely making threats. A policeman strode by, lifting his straw helmet to wipe away the perspiration from his forehead.

"Ain't this hot weather just awful?"

"Yes, Clara, it is," assented Elsie Stricker, Clara's younger cousin. "I was just saying to Uncle John on the way over, how hot it was. It's just awful. I sure will be glad when I get down to Cape May. I'm going down with some girl friends for a two weeks' stay, the first of next month. Oh, boy!"

Elsie was a typical salesgirl, who worked in Rickard's, in the millinery department. She was dressed with rather a dash.

"I believe Bob Morton is going to be down there at the same time," she finished, with a self-conscious giggle. "He's our floor manager, you know. Oh, boy!"

"I bet you're stuck on him!" said Cissie Stricker. She was Clara's younger sister. She regarded herself as a typical flapper; she made no secret of the fact that she thought divorce a good thing; she was in the third year of the Eastern Female High School, and she might go to Goucher. She read *Zippy Stories* in secret, and knew all about the Decameron.

"I think pop's going to take us all up to Pen Mar, for a month," she announced with a superior air. "We all like the mountains so much more than the seashore. It's just a bit more exclusive and—and—well, intimate, you know."

"It depends a lot on the figure you've got," said Elsie, with another giggle. "Oh, boy!"

A deep silence suddenly drenched the room. Every one else considered that Elsie had made a wrong remark; it was out of place for a young girl to say such a thing.

Old Mrs. Turner, Charley's mother, who hadn't understood the joke, saved the situation by remarking:

"It's nice up in Pen Mar. I was there myself once. It was about twenty or thirty years ago. Charley was only a little fellow in skirts. We all went on an excursion; I think the fare was seventy-two cents round trip. Lord, it was certainly a hot day!"

Mrs. Turner often talked about that famous trip of hers to Pen Mar. It had been the one adventure in her life. She had never been anywhere else in particular. Washington was only forty miles away, but she had never been there. She had always been poor. Her husband had been employed in a glass factory at Locust Point. All her adventures were spiritual; she had the most amazing religious experiences, and got up and bared them boldly at Wednesday night prayer meeting in First Baptist Church. She was always dreaming that Jesus Christ came into her bedroom, as a bridegroom.

"And praise God!" she would cry, "my lamp was lighted and I was wide awake! For I knew not at what hour the Son of Man would appear!"

Mrs. Turner regarded Sheldon's "In His Steps," or "What Would Jesus Do?" as the literary epic of the age. For young girls she recommended "A World of Girls" by Meade. She believed in the Apostles' Creed; she believed in the Holy Bible; she believed in the Baptist Church; and she believed that whom God had joined together, no man might put asunder.

"Yes, Pen Mar's all right, and Cape May's all right, but there are lots of places that are better," said another voice from the dark shadows of the room; a very precise and self-assured voice. It was Henry Stricker speaking, the brother of Clara and Cissie. He was a thoroughly godly young man, although he did squint out of his west eye. Some day he would inherit the Atlass Brush Company. He was a member of the Baraca Bible Class, Junior, in the First Baptist Church, and was his father's right hand man in business.

"You folks haven't traveled much," he pursued, musingly.
"It's a great world, you must remember."

"I guess *you* think *you've* seen the world," sneered Elsie, who secretly admired her cousin.

"I've been to Philadelphia!" exploded Henry indignantly. Elsie subsided.

"Travel broadens the mind," remarked John Stricker ponderously.

It was right that John Stricker should speak ponderously, for he was a ponderous man, physically, mentally and in public importance. He was a typical old-line business man of the city, thoroughly awake. Straight back to old General John Stricker he traced his ancestry.

Every typical citizen knew that General John Stricker commanded the valiant American forces at the celebrated battle of North Point. Hardly any one outside of the city knows that there was a battle of North Point, but every typical citizen inside the town knows it from infancy. Before the marble court house there is a slender shaft of gray which is known as the Battle Monument. It is a favorite allusion of orators, and a severe consecration in the public schoolrooms.

John Stricker was a direct descendant of the illustrious old General. Moreover, there was a street named after the family; John Stricker never quite got over it when the niggers captured it and made it their very own.

But ancestry was not the only claim John Stricker raised to importance. He was ponderously important in his own right. He was a self-made man, and he had made a good job of it, if he did say so who shouldn't.

John was a very large man, with a round grizzly head, and drooping ruddy cheeks, mottled and splotched with liver secrets. But his attitude was jovial and boisterous. His paunch helped out his jesting attitude. He was a man who made an artistic combination of being at once jovial and

ponderously important; a benignant brush manufacturer, with a large balance in the bank, who laughed loudly at his own jokes, and always said a few wise words as he passed by.

A critical eye might have observed a rapacious slant to his jowl. But few critical eyes looked at John Stricker. He owned a big business; he was the sole proprietor of the largest brush factory in the eastern part of the state. His daughter Clara was boastful of the fact that she had never bought a brush since she was married; her father gave her the pick of the factory. He was a member of the Chamber of Commerce, the Rotarians, the Ancient Free and Accepted Masons, the Mystic Shrine, the Merchants and Manufacturers Association, the Travelers and Merchants Association, the Builders' Exchange, and was a leading light in the First Baptist Church. Frequently he was appointed an honorary pall-bearer at the funeral of a well known business man.

He was a typical citizen of the better class.

It was John Stricker's inner hope that the day would come when he would be written up in *The American Magazine*. Being a self-made man; started without a nickel, and now look at him; he believed implicitly in the equality of opportunity, and the current optimistic doctrines of success for young men. He talked in quotation marks, italics, capital letters and exclamation points.

His humor, which was noisy and often, came from the comic papers. All the jokes that he could understand, he memorized and later got them off at delicate moments when he fancied a joke would help matters. He had invested in all the courses in "Pelmanism," "Will Power" and "The Master Key" and practiced them all.

He was one of the minor heroes of the city, but down in Talbott County, where he came from, he was a legendary god.

John's wife was sitting beside him as he delivered the ponderous sentiment that travel broadens the mind. She was

a silent and adoring woman, but with odd moments of unexplained bitterness.

"Do you think travel is necessary for success?" asked Elsie innocently.

"No," replied John judiciously. "I do not. A man should not *stare* up the *steps* of success. He should *step* up the *stairs* of success!"

"Oh, boy!" said Elsie admiringly.

A fluttering hum of admiration murmured from one to another.

"Gee, pop, that's a good one!" exclaimed Henry admiringly. Early in life Henry had discovered the golden principle of success. It was simply to admire what father said. "Is that an original?"

"That *is* an original," confessed John modestly. He did not remember that he had come across it on an advertising calendar. He memorized epigrammatic banalities whenever he could understand them, and then forgot their origin. He had a way of enunciating them that stamped them as strictly Stricker. It was a phrase of which he was proud; his brushes bore as their trade-mark, "Strickly Stricker!"

"The whole question of success," he continued, with a note of magniloquence in his tones, "is answered in ourselves. We must try to be true to ourselves—and do something in this world. Wise men try to do *something*. Fools try to do *somebody*!"

"Oh, boy!" murmured Elsie.

"Was *that* an original?" gasped Henry.

"That, too," confessed Mr. Stricker, "was an original."

Inspired by these comments, and by the manifest impression made upon the others, John continued:

"We have only to be patient, and work hard, and keep wide awake! That is the ticket! Patience, industry—and keeping wide awake!"

"I don't know about that," cut in Clara, bitter and crisp.

"God knows I've been patient, and there ain't anybody can't say I don't work hard, and I'm awake from morn till night, and what do I get out of it, I'd like to know? I'd like somebody to tell me that. I feel like a donkey on a treadmill. He works hard and he's patient, and he keeps awake. He's a jackass and so am I, I guess."

Her father felt obscurely offended. He was dealing in pleasing quotations, merely, and he resented such a personal and unnecessary contradiction. But he contented himself with a bushy clearing of his throat, a pounding of his fist on the arm of his chair, and the remark:

"A lazy man is as useless as a corpse—and he takes up more room!"

Before Henry had the opportunity to inquire if *that* were an original, they all heard a most peculiar sound.

Rodeheaver's record had been locked up for the night, the negro babies were asleep in their greasy cradles, and the chatter of the front-step family groups was now subdued. A hush was creeping slowly upon the neighborhood, when a long-drawn, piercing wail came from the upper regions of the house.

"What on earth is that?" demanded Mr. Stricker. His wife had jumped at the eerie sound; the others were fluttering inquiringly.

"That's Charley!" announced Clara, in a tone that added, "Now you can see what I put up with!"

"Charley!" repeated Mr. Stricker incredulously. "How is it possible for Charley to make a noise like that?"

"Oh-h-h, his latest crazy fit!" declared Clara waspishly. "Nobody will ever understand what I put up with from that man. No one ever *will* know, I guess."

"But how can he make a noise like that?" insisted John.

"It's a thing that looks like a potato," explained Clara.

"Looks like a what, Clara?"

"A potato!"

"A potato?"

"A potato!"

"But how can anything look like a potato?"

"Well, it does, that's all. It's made out of wood. He stole a dollar bill out of my pocketbook for it!"

"A dollar bill for a wooden potato?"

"Yes!"

"Well, Clara, I don't——"

"I forget what he calls it," cried Clara, as if the last vestige of her patience were carried away on the streaking strains of wailing music that came filtering down the stairs.

"He says it's music."

"Well, I must say, Charley has peculiar ways sometimes," remarked Mr. Stricker searching through his pockets for a toothpick.

"Sometimes?"

Clara's voice was belligerent, with the beat and throb of her sick headache.

"I wish to the Lord it was only sometimes. It's all the time, let me tell you. Day in, day out, from morn to night, it's always something with Charley. Charley ain't like anybody else!"

An embarrassed silence settled over the company. They all hoped Clara would go on and tell them more of her domestic difficulties. But they didn't want to say anything.

"Henry," said John, after the pause had risen to a very shriek of silence, "I think the girls would like some soda water. Suppose you all take a walk around to Lafayette Square, and step in at the drug store on your way back. Here's fifty cents! Have a good time."

There were grumblings, but they went.

Left in the dark parlor together, plying their fans, were Clara, her father and mother, and old Mrs. Turner.

"Well, Clara," said Mr. Stricker, after the voices of the younger ones had departed with them up the street, "you said you had something you wanted to talk with me about. What was it, daughter?"

"Him, of course," remarked Clara tartly. "Who else?"

"What's the matter with Charley?" asked Mr. Stricker.

"What ain't the matter with him?" demanded Clara. "That's what I want to know. He's acting mighty queer, I want to tell you!"

"He is?"

"Yes, he is!"

"Charley's a good boy, if he is queer," inserted old Mrs. Turner dutifully.

"Oh, he's fine!" said Clara. "There he is upstairs now, when he ought to be down here like any other man with his family—up there blowing into a wooden potato!"

"He's a good boy," insisted old Mrs. Turner.

"Good as long as there ain't nothing around the house to be done. He's the laziest man God ever let breathe the breath of life. Just let there be something to be done around the house, and then watch little Charley. He can't drive a nail straight, and if you make him do it, he mashes his thumb nail and curses so hard it makes your flesh creep. It's just awful to listen to his language. He won't turn his hand to a living thing. 'Get a nigger and give him a quarter,' he says. Wants me to get a nigger every time I want a trunk moved or a curtain hung or a window pane put in. A lot of quarters I've got to give to niggers. Charley's just lazy, but that ain't all. He'll sit there, night after night, day in and day out, and see me washing the dishes and never lift a hand to wipe a plate. Not even a cup and saucer. Sits there with his feet propped up in the dining room and hums!"

"Hums?" repeated John.

"Yes, hums!" said Clara.

"Charley always did that, even when he was a little boy,"

said old Mrs. Turner. "He closes his eyes and hums. Tunes I never heard. I think maybe he makes them up. Clara's right about that. That's Charley!"

"I think I've heard him hum," remarked Mr. Stricker thoughtfully. "I wonder why he hums?"

"So do I," said Clara.

"Charley always was different," volunteered Mrs. Turner, not without a tinge of disapproving frankness. "He never was like other children. When he was little, I used to put him out front, but pretty soon he would be ringing the front doorbell and wanting to come inside again, to play by himself. He always played games different from anybody else. He used to make up plays and act them on the kitchen table with his toy soldiers; he'd make out it was a stage in a theayter. His poor father and me used to worry a lot about him. But you couldn't do anything with him. I used to say he wasn't never weaned!"

"Something ought to be done with him," argued Mr. Stricker slowly. "And I think I know what it is. He needs waking up!"

"You bet he needs waking up!" said Clara.

"He's good to you, though?" asked her father.

"He don't beat me, if that's what you mean. But he does lots worse. He don't talk to me. He looks at me with funny eyes, and says things I don't know what he means by. Day in and day out, he'll sit around and not say a word, or if he does say a word, it's some foolishness that hasn't got any sense to it. I sometimes don't think he's right! Once I found him with tears in his eyes!"

"Tears in his eyes?" repeated Mr. Stricker aghast.

"Yes!"

A sudden gleam came into John Stricker's eyes; a gleam of shrewd suspicion.

"Clara," he said slowly, "I've got a little theory about

Charley. I can't tell you what it is, yet, but I am going to find out!"

"If you can find out, it's more than I can. I've given it up. Sometimes I am about ready to jump off the Light Street wharf. I wonder how you stand him down at the office."

"Well, now, I must admit that Charley and I have our disagreements. I think he sort of takes advantage of me because I'm his father-in-law. But he *is* your husband and I always try to remember that fact, Clara. The trouble is with Charley, he hasn't caught the spirit of our organization. We're a go-getting brush factory, I want to tell you. We're wide awake. And Charley is half asleep half the time. Day dreaming! I guess I ought to have a little talk with Charley; a really serious talk. He ought to be getting along. He ought to be making more than twenty-five dollars a week by this time!"

"Hmph! I just guess he ought!" said Clara. "But I know he ain't worth any more, pop! But he could be! Charley's smart all right!"

"Charley always was smart," remarked old Mrs. Turner.

"He lacks diplomacy! He lacks tact! He needs somebody to wake him up! There's no doubt about that," decided Mr. Stricker. "Sometimes he says mean things to me. About how we run things down there. Now we know how to run our business, and he ought to be helping, not criticizing. I don't allow criticism from my employees, even if it happens to be my son-in-law. That's business. You've got to have discipline!"

"Oh-h-h, I don't know!" exclaimed Clara. "Day in, day out, morning in and night out, it's the same thing. He's always talking about the wonderful things he would like to do! All he wants, he says, is an opportunity!"

"Man makes his own opportunity," quoted Mr. Stricker, with finality. "I made mine. And there's plenty of room for Charley to make his, right in my plant! Why, look at the men at the top of my business now! They're men who wanted

to get along in the world. They are trained men. And that's what I want—*trained men!* They are the ones I've got my eye on, I want to tell you. When I know that a fellow in my plant is taking a correspondence school course at night, I've got my eye on him, I want to tell you."

"I wouldn't mind," explained Clara, "if Charley took the money to spend on anything like that, where I could see a chance of getting it back. But he spends it on nonsense. Books of poetry! Just think of that! I've been wearing the same old suit for the last three years and he buys little thin books with the money I need for my back! He doesn't care a *thing* about money; he'll waste it on any fool idea he happens to get in his head! Look at the hat I'm wearing! I've had it made over twice, until I am sick of looking at the durn thing!"

Mr. Stricker cleared his throat.

"Well, why don't you have it out with him right now," urged Clara. "I can't do anything with him. I've talked and talked and talked, day in, day out, morning in and night out, and what good did it do? Why don't you go upstairs and talk to him?"

"Talking to Charley never did no good," advised his mother drearily.

"Well," said Mr. Stricker, "perhaps it was because he wasn't talked to right. It isn't what you say, Mrs. Turner—it's *how you say it!*"

"Mr. Stricker would know how to approach him," declared Mrs. Stricker, breaking her long silence in defense of her husband.

"Of course he would," agreed Clara.

"He simply needs waking up. That's all!" said Mr. Stricker positively. "I'll go up and have a talk with him!"

As he mounted the stairs, a strain of weird melody drawn from the very soul of the dollar wooden potato floated tantalizingly downward from the upper darkness.

CHAPTER THREE

BRUSHES AND SHOES AND DREAMS

CHARLEY TURNER was playing upon an ocarino.

The resemblance of this undeniably elemental musical instrument to a potato may have been a fancy in the mind of Clara. Certainly its lines were neither graceful nor geometrical, nor did its music commend itself to the ears of the judicious.

Charley favored it because he considered it better than his own humming, and less physically exhausting. Even that, however, was debatable. It was louder, certainly.

He was sitting on the side of a chair, playing the thing with a perspiring delight which any one would have found it difficult to understand. The room was a small store-place, next to the bathroom, at the extreme rear of the second floor. Its one window opened on a narrow court, running the length of the house, and the hot, moist air that came in, meeting the pollutions of the jumpy gas-flame, made the place suffocating. The walls of the room were covered with weird drawings in crayon; when Charley was not playing on the ocarino, he was drawing pictures on the wall or on scraps of paper.

In order to be comfortable, Charley had removed his shoes and his stockings; his collar was off, and his shirt turned down exposing his chest; his sleeves were rolled to the elbows, as if he were a magician, and his ocarino a strange masterpiece of his mystic art.

Charley was not a bad-looking boy. He was not more than twenty-three years old, and the curl of his rust-red hair,

the cleft in his chin, and the impish tilt of his nose gave him an air even more youthful. His eyes were larger than most men's eyes; round and with a changing luster of aqua-marine; sometimes sea-blue, or again green as the morning sea. There was the twinkle of incorrigible jest somewhere in them; his eyes were unlike the typical eyes of the people who knew him.

With the ocarino at rest against his lips and cheek, he was at perfect peace with the universe, although now and then his fingers were lifted from the holes in the bulging sides of the toy, to bash a mosquito, or fleck away a drop of perspiration from his eyes. He had discovered that the ocarino could respond most artistically, if one but gave it a chance. All it needed was an Oriental melody to make it sing. Its weird wail gave him a thrill; there was something deep and satisfying in blowing into it and making *The Song of India* come out of it.

All his life, Charley had wished to make music and to draw pictures. His parents had been too poor to give him art or music lessons. He had never learned to play anything beyond a sheet of tissue paper laid across a comb, or to draw anything other than weird sketches, somehow startling and eloquent. His humming had kept him musically content until, a week before, he had discovered the ocarino.

It was an event in his life; he had completely mastered its technique.

At the most poignantly exquisite thrill of the Rimsky-Korsakoff air, he heard a rattle at the knob of the door, and was forced to pause.

His father-in-law, John Stricker, was upon him.

"Helloa, Charley!" shouted Mr. Stricker, with a hilarious swing of his arm. "What are you trying to do up here? Sweat yourself to death?"

"Good evening," returned Charley, leaning back in his chair, and extending his bare feet impudently. He wriggled

his toes good-naturedly in the general direction of his father-in-law.

"Why didn't you come downstairs and sit with us?" inquired John genially, as he sat down on a trunk and stared in wonderment. "Henry was down there, and Cissie and your Cousin Elsie. We all missed you!"

"That was kind. I thought I would bore you to death. And besides, I wanted to write a song!"

"What?"

"Yes, really."

"Now what do you know about writing songs?"

"Not a damn thing!"

"Well, then——"

"I know! But sometimes we can't keep from doing things, even though we don't know how to do them. Get me?"

"No, I can't say I do, Charley!"

"Well, anyhow! This afternoon I was in the ten cent store —down on Lexington Street. They are selling little leather books in there that are a wonderful bargain; only ten cents apiece. I was crossing an aisle when I suddenly halted, absolutely dumbfounded!"

"Shoplifter?"

"No. A nun!"

"A Catholic sister?"

"Yep! God! You should have seen her. She was standing there, in the center of the aisle. Her wimple was thrown back a bit, the whiteness of her forehead was like snow, and in her eyes was a mist. I swear there were tears in her eyes! Think of that! Tears in a nun's eyes—in a ten cent store!"

"What was she crying for?"

"Ah, that was my question, too. I stood there, looking at her—she was standing very still and straight, and her slender white hands were held out in front of her, as if in petition. They trembled a little, those soft, womanly hands. And on

her face was the wishful look of a little girl. She was breathing deeply, as if the fragrance of her youth were near.

"And then—" Charley rose in his excitement, and bent over Mr. Stricker, his voice husky with the memory of a sweet and sad surprise—"and then I saw what it was! She was at the perfume counter!"

There was a moment's silence.

"Yes?" prodded Mr. Stricker. "At the perfume counter?"

Charley laughed gayly as he dashed his hand across his wet forehead.

"Well, that's why I want to write a song. I want to put into music what I saw in that dead girl's eyes!"

"She wasn't dead, was she?" demanded Mr. Stricker, beginning to be exasperated.

"No!" grinned Charley forgivingly. "Only I think she died,—I think that was her last moment alive. Or—I don't know—perhaps—well—See?"

He twiddled the ocarino happily on the end of his big toe, while John sought for his handkerchief in a confused and troubled silence.

"I don't understand you, Charley," confessed John, after a little while. "And what's more, I don't think you understand me. We don't understand each other. Now that's not right, Charley. We ought to understand each other better."

"Am I such a mystery?" asked Charley banteringly.

"You sure are, to a lot of people. Take our Miss Simmons, down at the office, for an example. She told Henry the other day that you insulted her."

"Preposterous! I—"

"Well, now, you told her something that hurt her feelings. You told her you were tired of seeing her wear nothing but blue all the time."

"That's right. I am tired of it."

"But Charley, it's none of your business what color she wears. And blue is a sensible business tint."

"It isn't quite a tint," remonstrated Charley. "But why doesn't she change it, now and then? For the last three years—day in, day out, as Clara says—I've been looking at that old maid in a blue dress, until I'm tired of it. She wears a blue serge dress until it wears out, and then she buys another one just like it. It gets tiresome. It makes me wonder, sometimes, whether she ever changes her underwear."

"My God, Charley! You forget yourself!"

"I beg your pardon. I suppose I do. But why not frankly admit what we think? I heard Miss Simmons debating with another clerk one afternoon about the value of citrate of magnesia for an ailing poodle dog, and I've never cared for her since."

"They shouldn't talk about such subjects during business hours," agreed John. . . . "But look here, Charley. I want to have a frank talk with you. There's a lot of things we ought to talk over. Did you ever realize that you were making us all very unhappy—especially Clara?"

A shade came and went in Charley's eyes; the shadow of a doubt.

"Has Clara been complaining?" he asked quietly.

"No! Not at all! But I can see by her manner that she is worried. She's ambitious, Charley. She wants you to get along. She wants new clothes once in a while like other women; an excursion down to Tolchester, the movies and little things like that. You ought to be making more money."

"I wish I was."

"You can't get anywhere by wishing," declared John severely. "That's the trouble with you, Charley. You wish all the time, when you ought to wake up and do something!"

"I thought I was a pretty good wisher," said Charley with a grin.

"You can't push yourself ahead by patting yourself on the

back," quoted John oracularly. "The road to success is slippery. A man needs a lot of sand!"

"Good!" applauded Charley, his voice remarkably like Henry's. "Was that an original? Or was that in one of the syndicate editorials?"

John elected to ignore this. Pursing his lips together, and pounding a red palm with his fist, he said:

"What you need, Charley, is somebody to wake you up. Now I am going to give you some pretty plain talk. You're a failure, and I don't care whether it hurts you to hear it or not, you're a disgraceful failure! You're *poor*. Your wife is ashamed of her clothes. You ought to be ashamed to have your wife ashamed. You ought to provide for her."

"Well, why the hell don't you raise my salary?" retorted Charley cheerfully.

"Because you're not worth it!" grated John, delighted at the opening. "You're on the same level as any other of my employees. You've got to wake up and deliver. You don't realize how you're drifting. Man after man has passed you at the office. They were *trained men* and I, like any other wide-awake employer, had my eye on them. But what are you doing with your spare time? Playing a wooden potato! Reading verses! Looking at Catholic sisters in a ten cent store. You ought to be ashamed of yourself!"

Charley stared at him thoughtfully. His gaze was puzzled. After a moment, he said:

"Intellectually, I agree with every word you say. Spiritually I reply, 'Damned rot'!"

"Charley, what do you mean?"

"I mean that I know I'm guilty, but I don't feel guilty. Can you explain that?"

"No, I can't!"

"Neither can I!"

"But you see——" fretted Mr. Stricker uncomfortably.

"I do see," interrupted Charley earnestly. "I know that you believe every word you say. I know I am a dog. I know I lead poor Clara one hell of a life. I don't know how she stands me—day in, day out, as she says. It's just plain hell."

"Well, what's the matter with you?"

"That's just it! What is the matter with me? I know what I ought to do. I know I ought to learn all about the brush business; to make a brushy background of my whole life; eat brushes, drink brushes, sleep brushes, dream brushes—I ought to brush up on brushes, eh—that's an original!"

"Can't you be serious, Charley?"

"No, that's another thing wrong with me. I can't be serious about the things you people are serious about—and God knows I can't be foolish about the things you people are foolish about."

"There is no occasion for profanity," said Mr. Stricker. "And besides, I was not aware that I am foolish, as you say, about anything particularly."

"This is the way it is," said Charley, a plaintive note of self-ridicule creeping into his voice. "When I am working, I want to be playing. And when I am playing, I want to be working."

"All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy," quoted Mr. Stricker. "But no man can succeed until he learns how to concentrate!"

"Exactly. If I ever found anything I liked, I would concentrate on it. But the only thing I can concentrate on is drawing and music!"

"Well!" said Mr. Stricker, disparagingly. "Drawing is all right in its place. So is music. But life isn't music and pictures, Charley!"

"No, God damn it," replied Charley. "But it ought to be!"

"We don't seem to be getting anywhere," complained Mr. Stricker after another painful pause.

"I sometimes wonder if I shouldn't get out of the brush business," remarked Charley, with a wicked glint in his eyes which John missed. "I do not believe I have found my proper *metier* in the brush business!"

"What is your—your what-you-callum?" asked Mr. Stricker sarcastically.

"I have often wished I was a shoe clerk. I wouldn't mind being a shoe clerk half so much as I mind being a brush clerk. I could occupy myself with interesting speculations, if I were a shoe clerk. It would be fascinating!"

"Charley!" gasped Mr. Stricker, aghast. "Do you mean—are you trying to tell me—is it women's legs you're thinking of?"

Charley chuckled.

"No! Though, of course, one would see a lot of ankles. What I meant, really, was the play offered the imagination. Just fancy! Selling shoes! I would sell a girl a pair of them, and then, when she had gone, I could wonder where her feet, shod in those shoes, would carry her. Perhaps to a tryst, under the golden cusp of a scimitar moon. On foreign shores and ships, maybe; perhaps to an assignation; she might even wear them into the grave. I would never tire of things to think about, if I were a shoe clerk."

He paused and twiddled the ocarino on his thumb.

"But what the hell can I think about brushes!" he shouted vindictively. "Brushes! Whatever they are, they are going into dirt. Toothbrushes on people's teeth; blacking brushes on people's shoes; scrub brushes on ugly kitchen floors. Brushes! Dirt! I shut my eyes and hate them!"

"You get your bread and butter out of brushes," said Mr. Stricker with deadly emphasis, his cheeks flushed a dark ruby—the red flush of wounded pride.

"The brush business is an honorable business," he said, throatily. "I am proud to say that I manufacture Strickly Stricker brushes."

"Well, what if you are? I don't like them any the better for that. I hate them all the worse for that. There is something in me that tells me I shall not handle brushes all my life. You think I'm a disgraceful failure, do you? You think I'm a no-account loafer. Well, what if I am? It's because I hate brushes! You love them. Well, love them then. But don't ask me to love them. I love something else!"

"What else is it?"

"A dream! There is a dream in my heart!"

"That's the trouble with you," exclaimed Mr. Stricker. "I told you you needed somebody to wake you up. Now look here, Charley. I don't want to quarrel with you. I want to help you. I want to come to an understanding with you. How much money have you and Clara put aside?"

"We've got three dollars in an iron bank, in the back of the bureau drawer."

"Goodness gracious! At your age I had seven hundred and forty-two dollars and eighteen cents!"

"And you've still got it all," smiled Charley.

"Every penny of it! And you ought to have that much, doubled, because the cost of living has doubled since that time. Now what is the reason I could do that, and you can't?"

Charley at first appeared not to have heard the question. He remained, his brows contracted. Suddenly he stood up, a flash in his eyes.

"Because everything is wrong," he said. "Because all my life—day in and day out—I'm doing the things that I have to do. I want to make music, write verses, carve marble, paint upon canvas. But I can't. I don't know how to do any of those things. I never had the time to learn. Instead, I have to stock brushes and keep track of them in your warehouse. There's something in me that cries out against all that. I hear that cry all the time. And there's a promise in it; the promise of a better time ahead for me. Everything fine and

beautiful that I want is coming to me. It may sound foolish of me to say it, but I just know I am going to do something splendid that the world will like. I can shut my eyes and see their faces looking to me, waiting for me to do the thing I was born to do—the thing they want and need!"

"Whose faces?"

"The faces of all the people of all the world!"

"And what is it that you're going to do for all the people of all the world?"

"I don't know!"

Mr. Stricker threw back his head, so that his bushy mustaches hung down over his mouth like that of a walrus.

"You're bughouse!" he snorted. "That sort of talk makes me sick. You think you're somebody great—why, you can't even earn a decent living for your wife. You! The world waiting for you? Everybody kow-towing to you! As if you were anybody to kow-tow to. That's the worst talk I've ever listened to from a young squirt that can't even support his wife. Now, I'm tired of talking to you, young man! My patience is just about exhausted. I am going to tell you something once and for all. As your employer, I want you to apply yourself to business hereafter, and be of some value to the firm that pays your wages. And as the father of your wife, I want to tell you that if you can't take better care of her, you're not going to have any wife any longer."

Charley stood, smiling, but white.

"As one of your employees," he said, "I herewith resign, my resignation to take effect immediately. As your son-in-law, I advise you to keep out of my family affairs, and attend to your own business!"

"Resign!"

Mr. Stricker's voice shouted the word like a jest.

"What do you plan to do—starve to death?"

"Not yet! I mustn't forget my dream!"

The door was suddenly flung open and Clara strode in.

CHAPTER FOUR

GETTING TO THE BOTTOM OF IT

“WHAT’S the matter?” asked Clara.

Her voice was accusingly sharp; her eyes searched the flushed faces of her father and her husband. Upon them she had detected at once the red evidences of a quarrel.

“Nothing’s the matter, Clara,” protested Mr. Stricker, huskily. “Charley and I have just been talking!”

“There is something the matter, too,” said Clara, with an impatient gesture of her hand. “Charley, what have you been saying to pop?”

Charley twirled the ocarino guiltily.

“I’ve resigned!” he announced.

“You’ve been fired!” exclaimed Clara, glancing at her father as if she were trapped. “Oh, pop, give him another chance!”

“I haven’t fired him,” her father answered, lowering his voice, and glancing uneasily at the open door. “Firing is not your father’s way. I try to develop men!”

His weighty assurance returned to him with the utterance of those last words. His shoulders went back, and his eyes flashed.

“Charley,” he said impressively, “you lost your head just now. A man can’t lose his head and keep it, too. Now——”

“What did you resign for, you big fool?” blazed Clara. “Haven’t I got trouble enough on my hands, slaving like some nigger servant girl for you, without having you throw up your job? What did you do it for, I say?”

She came closer to him, thrusting her thin, tense face up

toward his own. Across her thin cheeks was spreading a scarlet rash of rage. Charley did not reply.

"What did you do it for?" she cried again, her voice breaking into a moan, her pale lips twisting impotently. The sound of her own voice filled her with nervous shame; she glanced over her shoulder at the open door. Swiftly and in deadly silence she crossed the room; she closed the door with a mechanical caution, that no angry slam might reach the family downstairs.

When it was safely shut, she began to cry.

On the edge of an ancient trunk she slouched, her hands clutching at the frayed ends of broken leather straps, while her thin, hunched shoulders quivered and the silent tears dribbled down her cheeks.

"Why do I always have to have something like this?" she wailed. "All I came up here for was to ask him to go to the bakery and get some ice cream! And this is what I get! Now what will we do? Oh, my God!"

Mr. Stricker glared at Charley, not in reproach, but in appeal. Something had to be done; they couldn't let Clara go on like that.

"I didn't come over here for anything like this, either," said Mr. Stricker. "I didn't bring the family over here, expecting a fight. We were simply paying a little friendly visit. That was all. I don't want Charley to resign."

He was making secretive, pawing gestures with his hands toward Charley, beseeching signals of distress. He wanted Charley to do something, or say something, that would make Clara stop crying.

Of this, Charley was quite as anxious as he. Nothing quite so annoyed Charley as Clara, when she was maudlin in tears. He would pretend to any compromise; utter any absurdity to dry her eyes and silence her grief.

"Why, Clara," he said, eyeing the ocarino, as if anxious to placate it under the circumstances, "you haven't anything to

cry about. Really, I haven't thrown up my job. I was only telling your father that I thought I might succeed better in some other line. I resigned, but my resignation doesn't take effect until I land somewhere else. Isn't that right, Mr. Stricker?"

Mr. Stricker winked a massive eyelid and grinned magniloquently, as one crafty conspirator may, when it is wholly safe, grin at his confederate.

"Absolutely!" he lied, with a bushy clearing of his throat. "All I want is for Charley to find his real work. No man can be happy if he is a square peg in a round hole. But I believe there's a square hole somewhere for Charley. Do you hear that, Clara? Charley didn't mean anything. He and I are perfect friends. We understand each other. Go on, now, Clara. It don't amount to nothing. Go on in the bathroom, and wash your face!"

Clara stood up, dejectedly. Her eyes were lowered, her lips were thinned to a line of unconscious martyrdom. One long-suffering glance she bestowed upon her husband. Then she slouched drearily into the bathroom, the door of which she dragged shut after her.

A moment later they heard the splash and gurgle of water running in the wash-stand.

"Now you see!" said Mr. Stricker severely.

He came over to Charley, so that his voice would not reach Clara.

"What do you want to make her miserable for?"

"She likes to be miserable," retorted Charley, without resentment. "It's her peculiar form of pleasure."

"Nonsense! She's awful sensitive, that's all. She always was. Her feelings don't take much to get hurt. They never did. You ought to remember that, Charley. Now look here, young man. I want you and me to be friends. You're in the family, and there's nothing worse than when relatives get

to fighting each other. I know you love Clara, and I know Clara loves you. All you need is to wake up. And you're going to wake up. I'm going to make it my business to see that you wake up. There's a great future for you, Charley, if you wake up!"

Charley's smile was in a language which Mr. Stricker could not read.

"If you will just apply yourself to business," continued Mr. Stricker, warmly earnest and benevolent, "you can rise to the top. Just take a look at my boy, Henry. Why, there ain't nothing about our business that boy don't know. That's the way you ought to be. It's strictly up to you. You want to buckle down to the brush business, Charley; there's where your future is waiting for you. Every man's future is waiting for him, but he mustn't keep it waiting *too long*. If you will do that, I'll see that you get along, and you'll be happy and Clara will be happy. And what more can you want than that?"

He thrust out a red and hairy hand, and Charley entrusted his own hand into its damp but hearty clasp. The grip was unbroken when the bathroom door opened and Clara came out.

She looked at Charley first, with some lessening of her disapproval.

"Go get your shoes and socks on," she said. "And for goodness sake put on a collar, too. I want you to go to the bakery and get me a quart of harlequin ice-cream, and a couple of dozen sugar cakes with chocolate icing."

The gas in the dining room had been lighted.

In fluttering *chiaroscuro* it disclosed the golden quartered oak dining room set, bought at Hecht's in the installment plan; a sideboard, with bulging belly and glued scrolls; a serving table, a round dining table, with three extra "leaves" stored in the hall closet, and four chairs, one of which had arms.

Over the sideboard was hung a fruit picture; oranges, grapes, bananas and plums in a basket, the whole framed in mission wood of brown, streaked with green. Above the serving table was a companion picture, of a hanging string of dead fish. On the marble mantelpiece, above the Latrobe stove, was an imitation marble clock with faded gilt decorations. Long since it had ceased to tick. Near it was a plaster head of a laughing fat man, the top hollowed out, and filled now with a mixture of burnt matches and hairpins. There was also a snapshot of Cissie and Clara, laughing uproariously at some jest not disclosed. It had been taken at Tolchester. At one end of the room was a long, high couch, upholstered in faded green velour. An oak rocker with one arm missing was beside the window.

Laid across the table was a white cloth, disfigured with a brown coffee stain. Seven plates were arranged in a circle, each with its slab of Neapolitan ice-cream; a plate for Mr. Stricker, one for his wife, one for Cissie, for Cousin Elsie, for Henry, for old Mrs. Stricker, and for Charley.

Clara had not set a plate for herself. In a little while, some one would discover the omission. Clara would protest that she didn't want any. A general protest would ensue; seven voices would plead with her to sit down and eat like the rest of them. Eventually she would agree, and then everybody would be contented.

In the center of the table was a round, pressed-glass bowl, which had been given away as a premium at the opening of Bernheimer's new store on West Fayette Street. The bowl was heaped with the sugar cakes, iced with chocolate.

Clara was in the kitchen, making coffee, which was to be the liquid portion of the refreshments.

"I think I'll go back and see if I can help Clara," remarked Mr. Stricker.

A crafty observer might have suspected another motive

behind the benevolent smile of Mr. Stricker, as he marched from the dining room into the kitchen.

Clara was at the sink, holding the coffee pot under the flowing faucet.

"Clara," said her father, posing on his toes and then rocking back on his heels, "I just want to say one thing. Your father has got his eyes open. I don't want you to get down in the mouth about anything at all. Everything is going to be all right—strictly all right!"

"Nothing won't ever be all right for me, I guess," remarked Clara bitterly.

"Yes, it will!" insisted her father, a note almost bashfully akin to tenderness in his voice. "There never was a human problem yet that couldn't be solved. But all human problems require thought. They demand *concentration*; the concentration of a *trained mind*. A man has got to know *how to think* before he can *think how*."

"Yes, pop!" agreed Clara.

"I might as well drop you a hint, too, Clara. A hint to the wise is as good as a hit, you know. I've got my suspicions! All men are alike, you know!"

"What do you mean?"

Clara put down the coffee pot, and turned, her hands twisting her white starched apron.

"Never mind what I mean—now. I just want to ask you one question, that's all."

As Mr. Stricker paused for due dramatic emphasis, Clara carried the coffee pot over to the gas range, and set it in place. She struck a match, and turned the burner handle.

"What is it?" she asked in a low voice.

"Does Charley spend any of his spare time away from home?"

The match went out in Clara's hand. She remained, bent over the stove, her shoulders contracted, as she reflected.

"He never comes home on Saturday afternoons," she remembered finally, lighting the gas.

"Never?"

"That's what I said and that's just what I meant, too. Never. Many's the time he could have come home here and gone to market with me and help me to carry the basket. But not him! Week in and week out, Saturday afternoon in and Saturday afternoon out, he's gone out God knows where. I don't know where he goes or what he does with himself. In the library, I guess, with his nose buried in some old book!"

"Never comes home on Saturday afternoons," purred Mr. Stricker musingly.

"What do you mean?" asked Clara.

"We will soon be getting to the bottom of this affair. That's what I mean. There's something rotten in Sweden, Clara. Find out where Charley spends his Saturday afternoons—find that out—and you find out *all!*"

Clara's forehead was wrinkled into a painful frown.

"I don't understand," she wailed. "What does all that talk mean, pop?"

"It's better for you not to understand until there *is* something to understand. But to-night is Friday. To-morrow is Saturday. To-morrow afternoon is Saturday afternoon. Just leave it to your father. By to-morrow night, we shall all know something. . . . How are you feeling now, Clara?"

She looked up at him in martyred bewilderment.

"I've got a sick headache," she complained.

For some obscure reason, Mr. Stricker felt suddenly provoked. He went back into the dining room without further comment.

CHAPTER FIVE

“I WONDER IF THERE IS A WAY OUT?”

WHENEVER company came to call on the Turners, Clara and Charley quarreled as soon as the company went home.

The process was invariable.

Somehow, Clara always felt weak and devitalized the moment the door was closed upon departing guests. It was as if she had been supporting some galling strain during their visit; a strain which, when lifted by their going, left nothing behind it but physical and spiritual collapse.

They quarreled within five minutes after Mr. and Mrs. Stricker, Henry, Cissie and Cousin Elsie, and old Mrs. Turner had gone. With sprightly jesting and promises of seeing each other soon again, and assurances of what a good time they all had had, they took their leave together. Charley closed and locked the windows in the front parlor, and shut the outside door.

He and Clara were left alone in the house together.

Clara did not speak. Instead, she threw herself into the one-armed rocking chair, cupped her palm under her sharp chin, and stared in dull malice at the soiled dishes left in ugly disarray upon the table.

Charley smiled quietly. Clara always acted like this. Social intercourse demagnetized her, and left her sullen and bitter. To sit and brood thus was as much a part of her ritual as the ice-cream, the sugar cakes with the chocolate icing, and the coffee.

"Tired?" he asked, with an attempt at sympathetic good humor.

Clara sniffed contemptuously, but did not reply.

"Let's leave the dishes in the sink until morning. We're both tired. And it's sticky hot," he suggested.

Her glance was poisonous.

"You low-down, worthless, good-for-nothing dog!" she cried.

"Whew!"

"The very idea of such carrying-on as you did to-night! A nigger wouldn't behave the way you did!"

"What did I do?"

"You'll get your reward, you just wait! You'll suffer, young man. Some day you'll *have* to suffer. And I hope you suffer good and hard, I'll let you know. Good and hard! I hope you'll suffer like you've made me suffer, day in and day out, since the day I married you. The very idea of such carrying-on!"

"What carrying-on, as you phrase it, please?"

"You know, all right. Sitting upstairs with the family all here, as if you were too good to associate with them. Your own father-in-law having to go upstairs and drag you down. And then you resign—throw the bread and butter he gives you and me right in his teeth. You dirty hound! Insults! Insults to me and insults to my family! All I know is your insults, day in and day out, and I haven't forgotten one of them, do you understand that? Not one of them. You! You nasty thing, you're just no good at all, that's just what you are. It's a wonder to me God lets you live. It's a wonder to me he don't strike you dead with lightning."

"I should consider it a signal honor, my dear—a recognition from the throne itself. Of course, I should like to delay the affair; I am not vulgarly overeager, but—to go out in a slender spiral of flame! It would be magnificent!"

"There!" she screamed. "That's it! That's you! That's the way you talk! God ain't going to let you talk like that,

forever. You might get your wish sooner than you expect it, young man!"

The muscles of her face were in angry motion; she was thoroughly unbeautiful. Her appearance distressed the eyes of her husband. Once he had loved her for her physical charms; even now there were times when traces of her girlhood glimmered in her like the gleams of retreating torches. In anger she was homely. Charley believed that each of her many quarrels left upon her features the imprint of a permanent disfigurement.

"I can't have anything in *my* life," she was moaning. "I don't know why I was ever born. I can't even have my relatives come to see me once in a while. God knows they don't come very often. I don't have *much* company. And when somebody *does* come to see me, I've got to be humiliated by you. But it won't go on forever! God will find a way!"

A taunting laugh escaped Charley's lips. It left him looking ashamed, as if he did not relish taunts, even from his own mouth.

"I wonder!" he exclaimed tensely. "I wonder if there is a way. Oh, Clara, don't you see how miserable we are? There ought to be a way—somewhere! I can't let myself think about it. I've got to laugh, I've got to sing, I've got to draw pictures—or God knows what will become of me!"

The tears were streaking her cheeks again, as she stood up, trembling in her misery. Wearily she threw back a tendril of her hair, askew over her ear. She slouched to the table and stood with one hand on a soiled dish, pausing there, as if waiting for strength to go on.

The sight of her disarmed him. A wounding sense of shame betrayed him into pity. There was something infinitely pathetic in her attitude. The devil would have been filled with compassion for her.

"Clara!" he cried impulsively. "Don't cry!"

She turned away from him, shaken with weeping. He strode around the table and seized her roughly in his arms.

She nestled to him in a comfortable surrender. It was stiflingly warm in the dining room; they could smell the melted refuse of the ice-cream.

That was the terrible way with them. Charley did not love her. He knew he did not love her; long ago, he had abandoned the pretense to himself. Yet always his pity made him a traitor to the truth. At the end of every quarrel he found refuge in a lie. And Clara yielded when he said such things; tended and nurtured as her heart clamored and cried to be, she was satisfied until the next time.

His lies were as a drug to them; a deadly opiate which touched reality with a spiritual opium and made them an hour of forgetfulness.

Life was sucking them dry. Over them it brooded, relentless and implacable as this moist heat of midnight, which drained them even of the placid weariness which is the hand-maiden of sleep. On hot, wet pillows their two heads lay, open-eyed and listless.

Side by side they were, in the quartered oak bed of their quartered oak bedroom furniture, in the dark of the front second-story room. A Carey Street car turned screekingly from Mosher Street into Carrollton Avenue, and groaned heavily on its journey downtown. It was after twelve o'clock; the wide-awake city was trying vainly to sleep through the hot, reluctant hours.

The night was growing ever muggier, stickier. Clara was wet with stinging perspiration. Charley was feverish. Fiercely he had thrown aside all covering and lay, in his pajamas, sprawling under the canopy of the ceiling.

To Clara this was an unspeakable vulgarism. In bed, respectable people should be covered up for the sake of modesty, no matter how hot it was, just as one should lock the door when one took a bath. She was lying under a light blanket.

Charley's eyes were wide open, staring into space as if his

gaze were clairvoyant, reaching far out through the haze of the city, into the wild, cool quiet of the sea. Against the passionate blue and silver of the sky loomed the slender mast and spar of his dream ship, voyaging into unknown waters.

He cursed softly, mutteringly, profanely.

Clara, too, was looking into space, and her brain was busy with its own picturings.

She was wondering if she had forgotten to lock the kitchen door. Had she turned off the gas safely? What would she buy for Sunday dinner when she went to market to-morrow afternoon?

And to-morrow morning the insurance collector would call. His name was Mr. Harris. Mr. Harris was a good, Christian man. He lived in a furnished room on Pennsylvania Avenue. She had seen a hat of blue straw, trimmed with orange flowers, in a millinery window on Pennsylvania Avenue.

She wished she could buy that hat. She wished Mr. Harris could see her in it. It was a pretty hat. But she couldn't get it. Niggers had enough money to buy pretty hats of blue straw with orange flowers. She never had the money to buy anything for herself.

That was the way life was, day in, day out.

Accidentally, Charley's bare foot touched against her toes, protruding audaciously from under her blanket.

The contact had its own power; the subtle and amazing force of pity. That humble meeting of tired feet in the dark and the heat reawakened his compassion for her; made him wistfully concerned for her. Curiously, too, Clara felt a similar tenderness; an obscure mothering toward an incorrigible child.

In the same instant they turned toward each other. Charley put his arm under her neck. Her head slid nearer to him, lying at rest against his shoulder.

Clasped together, they fell asleep.

CHAPTER SIX

DREAMS AND REALITIES

CHARLEY was incorrigible.

There had been no doing anything with him from the day he could walk.

They said of him that he took after his grandfather, who in the old days drove down three days a week from his farm in Carroll County, cursing at his mules, his covered wagon of flapping canvas loaded with butter and eggs and chickens. Three times a week the old man came to the Eagle Hotel on Franklin Street and drank himself into a blasphemous and uproarious intoxication.

Charley did not drink, though Clara had once said there was no telling when he would take it into his head to begin. He took after his grandfather because he was a rebel; because he cursed things as they were and prayed for things as he would like them to be.

From early infancy his mind had been full of such prayers. Nothing had ever quite pleased him; always he was cheated out of perfection. As he grew older, it retreated farther from the reach of his hands; the moon had seemed nearer to him in his high-chair than his lightest fancy now.

He had never been satisfied with reality; he had always wished for something else, and seldom the wish came true. There was Fourth of July, before the days of safety and sanity, when the boys had real fire-crackers, and the holiday was one long detonation of explosions and flashes of bright fires. That hadn't been enough for Charley. Always he had

wanted to pile all his fireworks in one high mound, pour gasoline over the heap, and then toss a match into its very heart.

And Christmas, too, had usually been a disappointment. There was a thrill in being lifted out of bed by his father, perched on his shoulder, and carried down the dark abyss of the back stairs, to the kitchen where his toys were spread. But each Christmas he had looked in vain among those toys for those he most ardently desired.

There had never been given him the drawing set he craved, or the violin.

His whole life had been a succession of experiences which he could not possibly share with any one else, because no one understood. They looked at him queerly when he spoke out his thoughts; after a while he learned reserve. But he had never got over asking embarrassing questions.

There was the affair of the grocer across the street. Old Man Reid, the neighbors called him. Every morning, when the store was opened, Old Man Reid would carry out two huge barrels of sugar, and place them, like fat and ugly monoliths, at either side of the store door. Charley always wondered why he carried them out, and why, at nightfall, he carried them in again. They were so heavy, it was a marvel they did not break Old Man Reid's spine. Yet day in, day out, he carried the barrels in and out.

One day, Charley asked his mother why Old Man Reid did it.

"Why don't you ask a sensible question?" demanded old Mrs. Turner. "Ain't you got sense enough to know that all grocery stores has sugar barrels at the door? Now shut up!"

Life was filled with such puzzles.

It was about that time his mother sent him to Sunday school. She told him that it was God's house, and at once he wanted to know where God kept himself. Playing truant

from the class-room, he hunted in all the church closets, and even under the pulpit.

"This is God's house," he said to himself, "but where on earth is God?"

He was punished severely for asking such a question, but he was not answered.

His play-fellows bullied him, until he grew strong enough to bully them. They did not like him, because he did not like the things they liked.

Their rough games bored him. His mind, from the first, dallied with objects and ideas which, to others, were unnoticed commonplaces. Near his home was a roofed arch, just in back of the fire house, which was called a hay-scales. The swung flooring was the scale balance, on to which the hay-wagons were driven. All day long, during the summer, huge drays, high-laden with grasses of withered gold, were hauled under the arch by snorting trains of sweating brown mules. This fascinated Charley, though he did not know why; there was a breath of adventure about the business. In the ears of memory he heard often in manhood the tinkle and the jangle of the mule bells, the clinking jingle of their harness, and the hoarse oaths of their sun-burned teamsters.

All through his youth and childhood he was forever stumbling upon inexplicable moments of transport. When, for the first time, on a hand-organ, he heard the strains of the *Miserere*, he reeled like a drunkard, ready to swoon at such dazing sweetness of sound. It was an appalling stroke upon his imagination and his senses comparable to nothing less than a first sexual experience.

Even to the moment that he fell asleep with Clara's head on his shoulder, Charley was certain that he could be perfectly happy in life, had he only the art to paint beautiful pictures, or a violin and the skill to play it. Form and color thrilled

him. The sound of the violin put upon him a delirious ecstasy. To place its head lovingly against his cheek and caress its strings with the potent bow was an enchanted hope of his, persisting in spite of everything.

All that he could do was to draw crayon pictures on the wall, sketches on scraps of paper, and to hum; Clara called him a humming bird and laughed shrilly at her own jest—and then blasphemed his disfigurement of the plaster.

He wanted music. Early in his married life he had brought home a canary, in a gilded cage, wishing that it would sing for them. But Clara soon over-fed it, and it died.

His curious dissatisfaction with what contented every one else was never more virulent than in his hatred of the bay and his yearning for the sea.

During the summer, the principal relaxation of the people was to go on a boat excursion down to Tolchester, or some less popular of the bay resorts. Charley looked upon such outings with contempt. Except for a glimpse of the mild green breast of Fort McHenry on the downward trip, and the scarlet play of the furnaces at Steelton against the night skies, he was indifferent. About such trips there was, even in his early boyhood, a definite sense of being cheated. One was never out of sight of land. It was all finite; bordered neatly with a yellow shore line, fringed with the green tops of tame trees.

What he desired was green water, boundless, high and heaving, stretching away infinitely.

In every aspect of life he found such flaws; it had been always so with him. Very distinctly he recalled his childish emotions during a snow-storm. Here, again, his artistic impulses were violated by the careless hand of reality. For hours he would sit, when a little boy, at the front parlor window, watching the drifting white flakes, scurrying past him in silent laughter. The bulging gray cobblestones with

which the streets were paved softened under their quiet caresses and became an expanse of pure and white perfection. The sight lifted his childish soul. Then, rumbling down the highway a laundry wagon would come, stuffed with dirty linen, and its yellow wheels would gash black trails across the snow. He cried out in kicking, screaming rage against the sacrilege.

His mother had spanked him and called him a little fool.

She was always telling him that, when he was growing up. She did not understand when he ran away from the front doorstep, where she had put him out to play; she boxed his ears. The wharves were miles from his house, yet he would tramp through blistering sunny streets, hours going, hours returning, for a few moments' glimpse of the long docks, gray and white. There was something appalling and beautiful in the noisy riot of Pratt and Light Streets; hints of other and distant worlds in the ocean liners moored in the long, wet caverns of the docks; the coast-wise vessels with red and black hulls, the white steamers of the bay, stout and pompous and important, and the orange spars of the sailing ships, with their furled sails and mysterious coils of ropes. Even the fruits and vegetables seemed strange, cargoed in these trembling craft; not like the fruits and vegetables in the familiar market stalls. Red, ripe tomatoes; berries, black and blue and red; golden peaches and juicy green pears; green watermelons and yellow cantaloupes; silver mounds of shad and perch and rock; all the luscious commerce of the Chesapeake and the Eastern shore were there, a richer feast for Charley's eyes than they would ever be to any one's stomach.

No one ever understood him when he spoke of the charm these things had for him. They eyed him queerly and spoke afterward, behind their hands, in worried whispers. When fire had destroyed the business section of the city, he had laughed with a hearty and unthinking pleasure, crying out

at the crimson glory of the skies. For that he had been whipped. The fire was a tragedy; it turned one hundred and forty acres of business property, eighty-six blocks of store and office buildings, into black cinders, stinking smoke, and broken hearts. Was that anything to cry gladly about?

After that, his mother had gone patiently to the task of teaching him right from wrong; of discriminating between the ugly and the beautiful. God was beautiful; church was beautiful; the face of the minister was beautiful with the peace of paradise upon it. Charley frankly admitted that the preacher's face looked sour.

He and his world were opposed.

His mother tried to teach him Baptist hymns, but he preferred the yodels of black men, swathed around the belly with white aprons, swinging in either hand a glistening nickel bucket filled with oysters. In the barbaric lilt of those oystermen's tunes, Charley found a thrill and his soul tingled in subtle concord.

This tendency to find a kinship with the darkies frightened his parents and their relatives. Charley liked to play with little nigger boys and girls; he watched their elders with sly interest. They had the touch of the jungle upon them; somewhere he had been told that their grandfathers had lived in Africa. Mentally he stripped them of their ragged garments. He re-clothed them imaginatively, with a belly-band of straw. Towering spears, tipped with a deadly poison, he put in their brown hands. With armlets and anklets of wild beasts' teeth he touched them off; he set bone rings dangling from their flat noses and awkward ears; to his eyes they became wonderful and terrifying cannibals.

As he grew older, he developed two fierce passions—the theater and the library.

He read prodigiously.

The Enoch Pratt Free Library became his real home. Within

its quiet shelter, he sat at the round, red tables, exploring the whole vast world of books, from the Philobiblion of Richard de Bury, through Lord Clarendon's *History of the Rebellion*, up to Kipling, Swinburne and Barrie, an odd jumble that he loved especially well.

This extraordinary friendship with literature came about as the result of an accident. A book fell into his hands one day; he picked it up in the park; an outline of the best writings in all languages. As he read it through, a thirst to know every one of the thousands of books outlined in it possessed him. He set out to read them all. The result was that though he left school in the seventh grade, he obtained a sound education.

Those who did not disparage his studies, laughed at him tolerantly. Few praised his intellectual industry. They recommended that he learn a trade. They pointed out to him that only failures and people with nothing else to do spent their time in the library.

Their contempt for the library irritated him almost to fury. Frequently he cursed the poverty of the building in which literary treasures were housed. Even as a very young boy he recognized the inequality of the library building and other civic structures. The office buildings were splendid temples, and the men who used them wore expensive clothes. But the library was seedy and patched, like many of the readers who sat with him at the round, red tables.

"I don't understand it," he said one day. "The Court House, where people are sent to prison, is like the palace of a king. The Penitentiary is like a castle in a fairy story. The Fifth Regiment Armory, where men are trained to murder, is the finest building in town. But look at the library!"

People seldom did look at it. It was a modest and apologetic little building, on Mulberry Street, in the shadow of the Catholic Cathedral.

When Charley would speak of the glories he found in the

library, people invariably spoke scornfully of Enoch Pratt, the old millionaire who had bequeathed it to the city. They called him a miser. They related how he would walk through the streets, looking for stray nails in the gutters. They said he sold the nails to rag and bone shops.

"What does that matter?" Charley would angrily protest.
"The books are there!"

He wondered if the overseers had forgotten the library. The names of men he heard mentioned with deep respect occurred to him; were they responsible for spending all the money on armories, court houses and jails? What did Frank Brown, Edwin Warfield, John Walter Smith, E. Clay Timanus, J. Barry Mahool, Thomas G. Hayes, little Alcaeus Hooper—the long list of mayors and councilmen and governors and politicians—what did they think about it?

Often, on his way home from the library, Charley passed the prim and shriveled little figure of Cardinal Gibbons, sedately about his afternoon walk down Charles Street. His red cap showed under his silk hat, as he crept along under the bowing and reverent trees.

People said the cardinal owned the town. The Catholics said it with pride; the Methodists and the Baptists said it vengefully.

But Charley's only thought was one of wonder. If the little old man did own the town, why didn't he order a better building for the library?

As warm as his passion for his books was his love of the theater.

To get inside a theater, he would make any sacrifice, work any length of time, and at the most uncongenial labor. Running errands, minding babies, washing windows, doing work that he loathed and despised, he managed to get enough money to go to the theater once or twice a week, from the time he was fourteen years old.

He had to take the cheapest seats, but he went to the choicest performances.

Opera and concerts and drama were his favorite, but now and then he took in a vaudeville show, and more rarely went to a burlesque at the Gayety, or the old theater across the bridge, which was called the Monumental. When the Aborns brought opera in English to Ford's, he was always in the front row in the pit, once or twice a week. There he learned their repertoire by heart; he wept over Mabel Garrison's singing of *Cara Nome*, years before the Metropolitan Grand Opera Company knew there was such a voice in the world as that of Mabel Garrison.

Whenever Mr. Bernard Ulrich announced an opera at the Lyric—which in his childhood had been known as the Music Hall—Charley was there to hear. Yet his tastes were encouragingly catholic. He could become excited over a Blaney melodrama at Holliday Street, and still remember that on its holy stage had played the stalwart heroes of a mighty past.

He liked such diverse entertainments as William S. Hart in one of the early Triangle pictures, called "The Disciple," at the Auditorium; Maude Adams in "Chanticleer" at the new Academy of Music, and "The Sign of the Cross" at Ford's Grand Opera House.

The net sum of such a childhood and adolescence was a most complex and extraordinary personality.

While he was still too young to understand that he was an alien and enemy to the life and people around him, he had met Clara. Her physical charms had bereft him of his young judgment. He married her.

The realization of his difference from those people that he knew came later, after he was married. And then it was too late.

Just as Charley began to love and understand his dreams, the last links in the binding chain of realities were forged

upon his soul. He was a prisoner to reality; he who had wings. Clara was a distinct reality. His job in the Atlass Brush Factory was a reality. All his money, all his mind, all his heart, all his time, were mortgaged to the service of these realities.

They jarred him as the metallic screak of a car-wheel turning in an ungreased switch, or the oily smell of peanuts chewed by a negress. The blood was being crushed out of his heart, slowly.

He rebelled, but only verbally.

It was a singular fact that he could not find it in himself to break his fetters and escape. With his own hands he had chained himself; his moral scruples kept him secure from freedom. He believed sincerely that Clara loved him; he pitied her devoutly; he believed that her heart would break, if he parted from her; he saw no way out.

He submitted.

If there were another woman in his life, he meant that she should not know of it. He would deceive her, but meanwhile he would not betray her. Sometimes he believed it was because he did not have the courage to separate. But that was not true. In his clearer thinking, he knew it was not true. He was not a coward. If he had known that Clara could get along without him, he would have gone.

But he was utterly assured that Clara loved him, and life held no bitterer mockery than that. In occasional moments of unashamed honesty, he admitted to himself the truth—it was not marriage, nor any of the conventions which chained his feet, but his compassion for the stupid woman he had married.

In such self-facings he knew this to be his weakness; a weakness spiritually so disreputable that he could not respect his own soul. Already it was about the subtle work of eating away at his vitals.

He knew that, and knowing it, lacked the strength to crush

his pity, not fully aware that such a tenderness is inevitably a wholly fiendish cruelty.

Trying not to be bitter, he wore a jesting mask, japing and wounding those he pitied, staying on when it would have been better to run away; losing himself in fancies when there were fancies in which to be lost.

The odd and grotesque fancies that he cherished!

To be a burnoosed brigand, astride a galloping black stallion, racing across a desert of sanded gold! Idly to linger on the hem of a motley circle, squatting around an Algerian marabout, performing mystic thaumaturgy in the scarlet market place of the Moulay Idriss! To bargain with an art dealer in Venice, haggling over a tryptich, on the colored wings of which might be serious little angels playing on a psaltery! To bow the knee in a curving train of pilgrims of the Hadj, when the howling muezzin from a glittering minaret bellowed out the call to prayer.

But he must move on; men called upon him to wake up, and, pitying them, he rubbed his eyes and stared blearily at them and their realities.

More rarely he thirsted for a sleep so profound that it could have no awakening. Quietly and unafraid to glide into a Nirvana of unyielding calm; a slumber so serene that in it he would find a surcease from the torturing lure of his evasive dreams.

CHAPTER SEVEN

ANOTHER WOMAN AWAKE

THERE was another woman, wakeful beneath the warm breath of the July night; wakeful because of a sadness that lay upon her like a malediction.

At her open window she stood, the gold of her hair touched with a platinum band of moonlight. Beneath her lay a mild landscape, patterned after an English park; the lawn woven into phantomesque designs of tremulous shadow; the air humming with the whizzing drone of insects. Toward the east a white tower was lifted against the intense night blue; the ghostly dome of Homewood.

"How beautiful!" she murmured. "And how sad!"

Constance Lane had been charmed and saddened with the beauty lingering wistfully about this queer old-young city. She did not belong to the town. In no sense was she typical of it, yet coming into it as a stranger, she had found it a good and beautiful place.

Perhaps it was because she had found love, playing hide and seek among the trees of Mount Vernon Place, that she thought it beautiful and sad.

Of a surety she had found love, and with it a haunting and remote melancholy. Some one had told Constance long ago that love was an eternal elusion; she did not understand it then and she did not understand it now, but she felt it to be true.

Constance was a Boston girl, who did not wear horn-rimmed glasses or read the *Atlantic Monthly*. Her people had been well off; Constance was born in a sober-windowed, red-

bricked house on Commonwealth Avenue, and had been educated in a correct school. As she grew older, she had gone to a finishing academy for young ladies; she had taken her preliminary tour of Europe, and had made her girlish bow to society under the most exquisite auspices.

On her twentieth birthday, she was an orphan, with an income of less than five thousand dollars a year; all that remained of her father's substantial business. That had been two years before. In the interval, she had resisted the advice of maiden aunts and many friends to entrap a male with money and reclaim her place in society; she had discouraged the wooing of one or two of her old admirers, and had found herself well contented in a business for which she had shown an admirable adaptitude—interior decorating.

This business had prospered, so that altogether, Constance had an income of a bit better than fifteen thousand a year. In the preceding spring, she had been especially rushed on the North Shore, and when her two maiden aunts in Guilford had invited her to spend the latter part of April with them, she had accepted with some enthusiasm.

This visit was being long-drawn out. Whereas Constance had meant to be somewhere on the Massachusetts coast early in June, this July night found her still with her aunts. But now she was ready to leave them; she could not remain beyond the Sunday that was so near.

Love had coaxed her to linger; love born of an adventure with a red-haired young man in the concert hall of the Peabody Conservatory of Music. Frequently she and the red-haired young man met clandestinely in a precious and most delicious intimacy.

“Charley!” murmured Constance, confiding in the moonlight. “Bonnie Prince Charley!”

Charley had no right to attend those Friday afternoon recitals at the Peabody. He couldn't afford it. He squandered money which Clara needed for clothes, and he had

painful arguments with Mr. Stricker about leaving early on Friday afternoons, but he always managed to be there at four o'clock through the long and hallowed procession of great musicians who made up the season; Harold Bauer, Alma Gluck, the Flonzaley Quartet, and the others.

On that perfumed afternoon in April, Constance came and took the vacant chair beside him. Her face brought instantly a mist into his eyes and unimagined music into his heart. Though her face was not beautiful in a conventional sense, it touched him as the truant echo of a forgotten melody. Constance, looking into the clear and earnest eyes of this red-haired boy, saw something shining there that she loved without parley. From the first glance they were attracted; they chatted during the intermissions; they introduced themselves shamelessly, and then Charley had said: "Will you come out into the country with me tomorrow—please?"

There was a note in his voice that thrilled her. It was not like her to accept such an astonishing and daring invitation. But she had seen the honest pleading in his eyes, and there was, too, a masterful overtone in his voice.

Until that afternoon Charley had been a mental swaggerer in the courts of Venus. He judged love by his own marriage, which is a mistaken attitude in any man. Yearning for an ideal woman, he nevertheless had thumbed his nose at his own desire. Aphrodite was dead, he told himself. There was no woman left in the world worthy of the love he had to give—he felt sure of that.

Next day they stole off together over the hills of Mount Washington, and on the slopes and in the valleys their young hearts were tangled in the white meshes of the dogwood.

Curiously, in all the rainbow haze of the weeks that followed, they had left their love without a voice.

Charley had told her frankly who and what he was. He had not whined about his marriage. It was enough that he told her he was unhappy. Constance did not ply him with questions. There was a richer understanding in their silence.

Their lips had never touched; only infrequently did they dare clasp hands, for the dear pressure lighted a flame within them all too consuming and terrible.

They had no plans, or even hopes; nothing but their hours together. But such hours they were!

Their long talks—about everything! Especially he was happy when she would tell him of places she had seen—the Riviera, Paris and Cairo. Even Boston became a story as she described it to him.

Afterward he would curse the city in which he had been born, and out of which he had never traveled.

“This wide-awake city!” he would exclaim derisively. “The city of wide-awake slaves!”

They disagreed about this, probably because they looked at the city from wholly different viewpoints.

Constance found it charming. The atmosphere of a stately past hovered over it like a fragrance. She loved the old things about the town, the white ornate doorways crumbling on Colonial houses, the ancient trees and expansive homes which retained their dignity in spite of the blacks who were now their tenants. She found a delight in the green slopes of old thoroughfares—George Street, Mulberry Street and others like them.

Now and then she reminded him that there was a different life in the city, the life of the well-to-do classes, to which he was a stranger.

Charley was definitely of the middle class. He had never contacted with the gracious atmosphere of Guilford, or of Mount Vernon Place, where the gray shaft to Washington stands like a sentinel forever guarding formal social rectitude. Through her aunts Constance had met many of the town's best people. Here she and Charley came to a disagreement sometimes almost violent. Charley had a vague kind of socialism in him, but Constance insisted it was only envy. To rebuke him, she would remind him of some of the

great dreamers who had lived where he had lived—Poe, and Lanier, and Father Tabb. Mention of these was always sure to capture his enthusiasm.

"Father Tabb!" he would exclaim; "some day the world will know the old blind priest!"

And then he would clasp his hands and murmur some lines that Tabb had written, most often his *Invocation*.

"How," Constance asked him one day, "can you dislike a city which has nourished and suckled such men?"

"Because it has reared them only to kill them," he would reply hotly. "Haven't you been here long enough to know that this is a 'wide-awake' town—that its cry is a very *macabre* to the dead to wake up? It is a lovely place to dream in, but it is against the law to dream!"

"Then," asked Constance, "you have no love of home?"

"I have no love of this town," protested Charley. "I mean I have the feeling that I have never *been* home. I am here, and yet, oh, I don't know how to explain it! I am homesick all the time!"

"It is hard to understand," confessed Constance.

"I think it is the people. Or no—not the people either. The people are all right. It is the overseers, the people who are telling you all the time to wake up, wake up, wake up! There is no leadership in beauty. I believe that the people in this city have a love of beauty, but it is cold, strangled. The dream is taken out of their hearts and only the husk remains. Beauty is everything to me, Constance, everything in the world! And yet, beautiful things make me sad—even the gayest of Chopin's music, even the dearest rose on the bush, even the most calm sea. I wonder if it is because beauty is so fragile and so fleeting; the one irreparable thing in the world. Who can mend a broken flower? I tell you, Constance, they are blind to beauty here. Sometimes I hear a strain of music, or I see the sun glints on a slender cross at twilight, and I ask myself, 'Why is it? Where is the jus-

tice, that I can see this beauty and my brother is eating dust?" "

Constance leaned forward and touched him quietly.

"Perhaps your brother knows a beauty to which *you* are blind," she said.

He laughed.

"How is that possible? How can it be possible? Do you imagine there is a beauty in 'Strickly Stricker's' brushes—every hair of which is numbered?"

"I don't know. There should be a beauty and a dream everywhere. Only it seems to me that somehow you and Mr. Stricker will some day have to understand each other. I think you are wrong to scorn him as you do. Some day you may find something in Mr. Stricker, yes, and even his brushes, to which your soul will pay obeisance!"

With an arrogant shake of his head, Charley hummed a wild strain from Caesar Cui.

"There! The song answers for me. Music is our form of confession!" he cried. "Do you see, Constance, that all this love of beauty in me has been crystallized in you? I was sick for you before you came. I did not know who you were nor where you were, and then, I found you. I don't know what brought us together—how or why. I only know that I did find you."

"We found each other!" she interrupted tensely. "But you must not say these things, Charley. Let us live in the present. This is Arcady, where no one thinks of yesterday or to-morrow."

He flushed guiltily, and said no more.

The memory of the exquisite afternoon came back to her poignantly this night as she remained in the moonlit window.

To-morrow she would have to tell him she was going home. She was in love with him, but he was married, poor and middle class.

What would they do with their last afternoon?

CHAPTER EIGHT

CLARA HAS A VISITOR

AT breakfast, on the morning following the visit of their relatives, Clara was morose and unkempt; Charley was cheerfully quiet. He ate his breakfast with apparent contentment; he had never told Clara with what disfavor he regarded her unimaginative meals.

It was one of Charley's minor dreams to eat some day at a dainty table, with the napery and silver of luxury at his hand. Not having them, he accepted his unvarying two boiled eggs, served in a cracked coffee cup, bread and butter, currant buns and coffee.

But then, Charley's notions on food were as flighty as the rest of him. There were some foods which Clara greatly enjoyed, the sight of which set fire to his wrath. He detested bologna, cold ham, and compressed beef. The steamy odor of cabbage, for which Clara had an especial fondness, put him in a rage. Turnips and sprouts and pale yellowish-green squashes reminded him of virginal old maids in search of a sympathetic psycho-analyst.

It was his solemn contention that any person who ate onions or cheese was possessed of an ingenital criminal mind. This Clara regarded as another of Charley's daily insults; she regarded it as a direct criticism of her father. Mr. Stricker liked onion sandwiches and ate his cheese with a spoon.

Charley was humming as he entered the offices of the Atlass Brush Company the next morning.

The factory in the rear was already humming and roaring; simple and compound brushes were in the throes of birth; bristles, hair and fiber were in the very air one breathed; veneer and wire and varnish, wood and tools and grime; noise and hard work.

Everything in the place was strictly Stricker.

The crash and clatter of the plant drowned the humming of Charley as he came to his desk. He was loosening a rubber band from a packet of unchecked bills, when a hand was laid on his shoulder.

Henry Stricker, his brother-in-law, was squinting at him amiably.

"Good morning, Charley," he said. "Had a great time up your house last night. Say! You know what I'm thinking? You ought to take more exercise. That's what's the matter with you. Say! I'm going up to the Y. M. C. A. Building on Franklin Street this afternoon and work out. Why don't you come along—as *my guest*?"

"Sorry!"

Charley smiled, most inexplicably. His blue eyes were fixed candidly on his brother-in-law, and for no apparent reason at all, Henry flushed.

"I've got a date!" explained Charley, snapping the rubber band. "But I appreciate your invitation, Henry. Thank you."

His unwavering gaze seemed greatly to disconcert the young heir to the house of Stricker.

"Well—I'm sorry, too," he stammered. "But still you know what pop always says. What can't be helped, can't be helped, you know!"

"Yes, I know," smiled Charley. "That's an original!"

Henry went back to his own desk, in his own private office, feeling vaguely discomfited. In fact, he felt almost un-

masked; there was an odd discernment in that open gaze of Charley Turner's eyes.

Had he heard anything?

"I wonder if that guy's wise?" was the manner of self-interrogation which young Henry employed.

For there had been a cunning design in his invitation to Charley; a scheme hatched in secret conclave with his father, only a few moments before.

Mr. Stricker had come to work, wearing a smile of unctuous arrogance, which, to an observing eye, betokened a focussed purpose in Mr. Stricker's brain. His courtly manner, as he bowed to his stenographer, could be interpreted on the same basis. It was the revelation of an intellect which was about to function as only it knew how to function.

Before calling in his son, however, Mr. Stricker perused his mail. As a typical citizen, active in public affairs, and not wholly devoid of political aspirations, Mr. Stricker received a heavy mail, not all of which concerned the brush business. On this morning he found waiting for him letters from the East Baltimore Business Men's Association, Thalia Society, the T. O. V. Pleasure Association, the Maryland Oyster Association, the Maryland State Horticultural Society, the Baltimore County Teachers' Association, and the Woman's Christian Temperance Union.

Most of these were printed or mimeographed circulars, but Mr. Stricker read them faithfully and with the most attentive seriousness. Three of them he put aside for reply.

Then he summoned Henry.

"Henry," said Mr. Stricker, when the door of the office was closed upon them, "I want to talk with you about my son-in-law. You didn't know all that was going on behind the scenes at your sister Clara's last night. Well, now, I'm going to enlighten you. I believe Charley Turner is running around with a woman!"

"Gee, pop!"

"I know the signs. I know what it means when a man acts like Charley has been acting. Either he's crazy or in love, and there ain't much difference. Every Saturday afternoon he goes somewhere and nobody knows where. That's where you come in. I want you to find out!"

"Gee, pop!"

"That's what I want you to do. First go out there and try to get him to go somewhere with *you* this afternoon. If he says he has another date, then make your plans accordingly. Follow him. I don't care what it costs. I'll go to any expense; I'll spend five dollars if necessary to find out what that fellow does on Saturday afternoon. But be sure you don't let him see you following. If he gets on a street car, you follow in a taxicab. I want results, Henry, and I'm depending on you!"

"All right, pop!"

There had been an amused and an accusing glint in Charley's eyes when Henry invited him to the Y. M. C. A.

It worried Henry for the rest of the morning.

With more than usual haste that morning, Clara hurried through the washing of the front steps.

Back in the kitchen, she rushed through the cleaning of the breakfast dishes. An almost holy impatience actuated her in the sweeping and dusting, and in the making of the bed. Then she did up her hair, and otherwise composed her appearance, even to the extent of changing her gingham apron to one of starched white muslin.

Hardly were these preparations completed when there came a gentle ring at the door-bell.

It was Mr. Harris, the insurance agent.

Mr. Harris was a tall, thin man, bulging in the nose and cheek bones; with bushy eyebrows threatening his inoffensive eyes, and a deep voice. His people came from Harford

County. He was a member of New Baptist Church, and sang bass in the choir, though there were some in the congregation who thought he sang too loud. His one zeal in life was religion; the insurance business was only a means to an end. There were times when he found religion an excellent talking point in selling a policy; there were times again when selling a policy opened the door to conversion to the Baptist faith. He felt he had solved the problem of living as God wanted him to live.

"Good morning!" boomed Mr. Harris in his profoundest bass, as Clara opened the door.

Clara's smile was that of one who is meeting a partner in a great cause.

"Good morning, Mr. Harris. Nice morning, ain't it? But a little warm. Wasn't last night awful? I just thought I would die. Come right in, Mr. Harris."

She led him through the cool shadows of the hallway into the dining room, where Mr. Harris sat down audibly in the rocking chair with the amputated arm. He produced a large handkerchief and wiped his face with it gratefully. When he put it back in his pocket, Clara was smiling as she stood before him with a glass of ice water in her extended hand.

Mr. Harris accepted the water with a glance eloquent of his appreciation. He drank it all in noisy gulps.

"I think I owe you fifty cents this week," said Clara, with a little self-conscious simper.

"Let's see," temporized Mr. Harris.

From his side coat pocket he exhumed a book, bound in damp imitation leather. With a red and hairy forefinger he followed his penciled notations, and clucked a calculation on his tongue.

"Fifty cents. That's correct!" he announced.

Clara handed him the silver coin and the little gray booklets in which receipts for the insurance money were recorded.

There was a serious silence while he made the entries. Then he passed them back.

"I guess you're pretty tired," remarked Clara.

"It's pretty hot going," admitted Mr. Harris. "But a man must do his work. You don't look tired. You always look happy, Mrs. Turner."

"It's nice of you to say that," said Clara, flushing. "I know you don't mean it. I know what I look like. Just an old rag!"

"Nothing about it! Nothing about it!" protested Mr. Harris. "Did you ever stop to figure how many women I see in a day, Mrs. Turner? Never less than fifty. *Never* less than fifty. I know women. And a good Christian never even lies to please a friend, Mrs. Turner. No ma'am. You're like the Rose of Sharon!"

"Oh, Mr. Harris!" giggled Clara. "You can't mean that."

"I do!" reiterated Mr. Harris emphatically. Then, as if to reëstablish a firm understanding of the moralities, he added: "How is Mr. Turner?"

"Just the same," replied Clara, downcast at once. "I can't do anything with him!"

"Don't give up hope," advised Mr. Harris. "Something will bring that boy back to God. It may be a scourge. He may have to suffer. God punishes those He loves. But some day your husband will be saved, ma'am!"

"God grant it!" said Clara fervently.

"There's going to be two baptisms down at Brantly tomorrow night," boasted Mr. Harris. "Why couldn't you get him to come down there with you? It might turn his heart from sin just to see it!"

"I wish he would, but you couldn't make him go. He'd only sneer at it. Calls it indecent public bathing. My, Doctor Wharton is a grand preacher, ain't he? Was you down to the praying band last Sunday afternoon? You wasn't? Oh, you ought to have been there. My, they had a

grand time. One little girl only ten years old was converted. She sang a solo all by herself; '*Jesus Will Cleanse My Sinful Heart*' was the hymn, and there was people crying all over the place!"

"I certainly am sorry I missed it," announced Mr. Harris.

"Oh, you would have had a grand time. We're going to have a new organist—Miss Healy's sick, you know—and there's a saved Jew going to speak to-morrow, and a woman whose husband died a Catholic is going to tell what she *knows* about the priests!"

"I certainly will *be* there!" decided Mr. Harris.

They talked for an hour. Clara always found Mr. Harris an especially agreeable companion. They were never bored with each other. He regarded her with awe; privately he told himself it was lucky for Charley Turner he met her first. She was the most sensible little woman he had ever met—and look at the many he *had* met!

CHAPTER NINE

"WE SHOULD NEVER HAVE TAKEN THAT KISS"

CONSTANCE was waiting for Charley, a little after one o'clock that Saturday afternoon, in one of the loveliest and most remote recesses of Druid Hill Park.

One end of the park juts out over the grave of an abandoned toll-gate, where a forking of the road sends the Reisterstown Turnpike and Park Heights Avenue forward in diverging angles. Here the park drops suddenly into a cool, protected valley, through which green water rambles over gray stones. It is a winsome and secluded spot, sheltered from the world, and on this July afternoon the green leaves were playing with the elfin sunlight, while the old winds murmured pleasantly through young and trusting trees.

Constance seemed a real part of the vernal background, one of a company of invisible dryads who had come out of the woodland to rest on a bench. Her simple frock of nile green organdy added a reality to the illusion that she was a part of two worlds; the trembling of her yellow hair in the breeze was as if some romping spirit had touched her playfully as he passed.

Her blue eyes, clear and calmly expectant, were watching the turn in the road where presently Charley would appear. There was a gracious pleasure in her expectancy; Charley had said of her once that her face had all the serene candor of a Raphael Madonna.

He was waving boyishly as he ran toward her.

"Close your eyes!" he cried, as he reached her side. "I've got a surprise for you!"

"Must I open my mouth, too?"

"No! Just shut your eyes—and, oh, yes! Open your ears!"

Constance placed her hands over her eyes.

"If you keep me waiting, I'm going to peep," she threatened.

Suddenly a most extraordinary sound assailed the quiet of the sheltered glade. It was a high-shrilled, piping wail, making an earnest pretense to the melody of *The Song of India*.

"Gracious!" exclaimed Constance. "What can that be?"

She drew her hands away and looked in mock astonishment. Charley was gravely spinning a round, gilded object on his thumb.

"It's a wooden potato, and no more, according to certain of my critics!" he announced. "But that is a prejudiced misnomer. It is, in fact, a musical instrument!"

Laughing, she took the toy from him and put it to her own lips. A queer little note came out of it, but that was all.

With a sudden and bewildering leap, his manner altered from casual playfulness to one of eager earnestness.

"Let me have it back—just for a moment," he murmured.

As she returned it to him, he pressed it quickly to his lips and blew a note. It was a low and tender sound, very poignant and sweet.

"That was beautiful!" she murmured. "It sounded like the happy call of a bird!"

"Constance," he said softly, "this funny little toy touched your lips and then touched mine. Why shouldn't it sing with joy?"

Henry Stricker had left the offices of the Atlass Brush Company with five dollars expense money in his pocket. This sum was now reduced to fifty cents. The taxi fare from the

factory out to the far reach of Druid Hill Park, where Charley had led him, had amounted to four dollars and fifty cents.

But Henry was not alarmed. His father would not complain. Already he had the evidence. Cautiously peering over the rustic fence, down into the green glade into which Charley had hurried, Henry had been witness to the little comedy of the ocarino.

"Gee! She's a peach, too," was his comment. "Well! What'll pop have to say about this? . . . Wonder what they're talking about? Some dirt, I'll bet!"

Possessed of a wholly natural curiosity in this regard, Henry made a wide detour. He scrambled down a grassy hillside, unobserved, and then, dropping to his knees, he crawled like a red Indian, silently, intently, among the prickly bushes, until he was concealed only a few feet from the bench on which sat Constance and Charley.

Even their murmurs and whispers were audible to him. He was chuckling at his own cleverness. Then a hand seized his collar, and he was jerked violently to his feet.

"What do you think *you're* doing here?" snarled the voice of a man. He was uniformed in gray, with a military helmet, and on his breast was a glittering badge.

"I ain't doing anything," panted Henry. "I was just looking for a pencil I lost!"

"Tell it to the judge!" jeered the park policeman.

Deaf to the whining protestations of the pallid young man, the park officer clutched his prisoner by the sleeve and led him away.

"Where are you taking me?" cried Henry in a panic.

"You're going to get a free ride in the wagon," promised the policeman. "All the way to the Jefferson Police Station!"

In the trees behind them, Charley and Constance heard the argument, and turned to look. They did not see the policeman or his captive. As the voices died away, they turned

again to their own affairs, not knowing what had really happened.

An uneasy embarrassment had fallen between them after Charley had spoken of the ocarino.

They were both serious; far more so than they should have allowed themselves to be. Safety, they knew, lay in a spirited and playful forgetfulness. But the innocent ocarino had altered their mood, and they sat, saying nothing, but understanding much.

“Constance,” Charley said suddenly, “give me your hand!”

Her blue eyes were startled, but without hesitation she placed her hands in his.

“We said to each other once, long ago, that we would eat the lotus leaves together, and find a pleasure in forgetfulness. Do you remember how frankly we spoke that first afternoon? You said there was a Presbyterian streak in you, although you were a modern woman? And we agreed that we would not make our hours together a vulgar episode?”

She nodded, her lashes hiding her eyes.

“Was it your idea, then—or your wish, even—that all this was to be only an interlude? That you would go back to Boston—and that would be the end?”

“I don’t know.” She faltered.

“Constance! When are you going home?”

She caught her breath furtively.

“Soon!” she whispered.

“Within a month?”

“Perhaps—within a week.”

“This may be our very last afternoon together?”

She nodded, biting her lip.

“Constance—we cannot separate without an understanding. We both know our hearts. We must face ourselves.”

“I am afraid——” she murmured.

He clasped her hand fiercely, his eyes embracing her, as he said:

"We must not fear the truth any longer. You have a right to know what I really am, and what I really think. Will you listen to me?"

The pressure of her hand in his was answer.

He told her the truth about himself. Hurriedly, harshly, he disclosed the sordid facts,—his dissatisfaction with life; the lack of sympathy between Clara and himself, the incoherent promise of his dreams. At last he told her about the visit of his relatives the night before.

"Now what does all this mean?" he cried. "It means that my father-in-law and all the rest of them want me to wake up, as they call it. They want me to be like the rest of this place. Constance, I do not know what it is, but there is something different in me. There is something inside my heart crying to be born! It is like a sweet pain, an anguish which I can hug to me and nourish. Since I have known you, it has been stronger, more demanding, more insistent. There is something the world wants in me—I don't know what it is, but I know these people and this city will crush it out of me, if I do not take care."

She pressed his hand, the light of daring in her eyes.

"Why do you stay here?" she urged. "There is such a thing as a divorce. You could get your freedom—and then!"

"But Clara——"

"What about her?"

"Don't you see, Constance, that I can't drop her like a wornout suit of clothes? I don't love her. I never should have married her. But now that I have married her, and she does love me, what can I do but pity her? Suppose that I left her, and she killed herself? I would have that on my conscience for eternity!"

"You pity her?"

"I pity her all the time."

"I can't understand. How can any one pity a woman like that? She doesn't deserve pity, or anything else but her freedom!"

"She doesn't want to be free from me. I wish to God she did!"

"She doesn't know that she does, you mean!"

"Constance—don't you believe me when I tell you I want to find a way out? I want you! If I have you, all my dreams come true. I can get out of me what is inside me, torturing to be let loose—if you are near! But I want to be fair and decent to Clara!"

"Charley! Charley! You talk about the typical citizen! That is your besetting weakness. You should be strong! You should seize your dreams! You should be faithful to your own heart! Your wife is keeping you by a false claim. I am afraid there is no hope—for us—Charley. Oh, why did you ever speak? Why didn't you let me go and——"

"Constance! Don't say anything else. You are right. I have been false to my own heart. I have been false to my dreams! There it is! It is you who have been strong, I who have been weak! After all, I have been an insolent prisoner, but that is all. I have let Clara and her father be my jailers. Constance, if there were a way——"

He caught her in his arms, his lips almost touching hers.

"If there were?" she repeated tensely.

"If I can be free, free to make you my own—will you come to me?"

"You must be strong!" she murmured. "I can love you only if you are strong. Free yourself! Seize your dreams and make them living realities. Then call to me, wherever you are, and I will come to you!"

A tear trembled on her lashes.

"Constance—kiss me!"

The winds encouraged them in lingering murmurs, and the

sunlight blessed them in their first flaming and passionate embrace.

He released her roughly.

With a sudden stiffening of his arms he thrust her face away while he rose unsteadily. In astonishment and alarm she looked up at him, unable to comprehend the meaning of such a swift and violent alteration.

Written on his countenance was a parable beyond all translation; of hope defeated, of old and baffled spiritual hunger.

"Constance!" he said hoarsely. "I lied to you!"

"What is wrong?" she faltered.

"I lied to you, I tell you, and I lied to myself! I don't love you. I said I did, but I don't. I never have loved you! I never can love you, Constance! It is all a bitter mockery!"

"Charley!" she gasped. "Are you mad?"

He laughed, quite like a lunatic. He was standing very close to her, looking down into her eyes, but slowly he began to back away.

"I suppose I am mad," he said with a queer catch in his voice. "And yet, Constance, not a moment ago you asked me to be strong. Very well, then! I shall be strong enough to tell you the truth, and the truth is—the terrible truth is——"

He paused, gazing at her in intent anguish, as if he dreaded to inflict the pain which he knew his utterance would bring. Her lips were quivering.

"At least tell me what you mean," she said tremulously.

"All your life you will hate me," he said dully. "But it is better that you hate me now and know the worst. Those months we have been together—those sweet, dear months in Arcady—I have played once more the dreaming fool. I dreamed that you loved me, but worse than that, I dreamed that I loved you! Constance, you don't know what that means! You don't know what I have to give with that love, and what that love demands! You were my dream woman,

bearing in your sure white hands all the good gifts for which I prayed.

"God! We ought never to have trespassed over the border of that dream. We should never have plucked the sacred flower, for look, at our profane touch, already it has withered!"

"Charley, please tell me what you mean!"

"I mean that you are not worthy of my dream."

She looked at him in incredible horror at the sheer brutality of his words.

"You are not my dream woman!" he repeated. "You are only a woman, only flesh when I wanted fire, only blood and bone when I sought the airy lightness of spin-drift and the lacy spray of the sea! All my days, Constance, I have groped in the dark, seeking the wayward hand of Aphrodite. But Aphrodite is dead! Long ago she died, before there were such things as rouge and cold cream and brassieres. Venus is a corpse at the bottom of the sea! No love is left in the world. Nothing but fleshly bodies, lips and teeth and garters and straps and shoes and frocks—realities. I dreamed of the perfect woman and now——"

She was quivering as she stood up confronting him in regal, if wounded pride.

"It would be just as well," she said, between compressed, pale lips, "if you were definite. Nothing that you can say could hurt me any more now than what you have already said. At least, may I not ask you to name the thing which has so distressed your æsthetic sensibilities?"

Suddenly he drew his handkerchief from his pocket and struck it across his lips. Then he held it out to her and on it was a scarlet stain.

"See that!" he cried tauntingly. "See that! The bloody imprint of the real in a real world—a universe stained with reality! Your lipstick—my God!"

"You are insulting and absurd!" she cried, in gasping fury.

"Insulting—yes. And absurd—no doubt. But I am acting only as you bade me, my dear. 'Be strong!' you said, and I am strong enough to tell you what I think. Oh, you have been clever! I have no wish to deny that you were clever, my dear! I never suspected that you used a lipstick. It was a most artful device. From the very first I believed the red on your mouth was the red of nature's own blood, the scarlet mark of health. But your hand must have trembled this afternoon as you sat at your dressing table. A lipstick—my God! Can you imagine Venus with a lip stick? Can you fancy Aphrodite powdering her nose or Juliet with a depilatory? Great Lord God Almighty! These are the damned realities that hold a wake over the casket of dead romance! My beautiful Constance! We should have said good-by in Arcady. I had idealized you and I should have gone on remembering you as that dream phantom I had evoked. We should never have taken that kiss. Then I should never have awakened. I should have dreamed on—just dreamed on. I should never have tasted the unsavory mess with which you painted your mouth. Your lips were a lie and a fraud, and if that is so, your heart is another kind of fraud, daubed with some other kind of paint, and your soul dyed with something worse yet! I know that I am a fool, but I did seek in you the perfect thing—and I found a lipstick! Just another dream gone to smash!"

She gave a little cry of utter wound and shame and contempt for him, and, turning from him, fled, leaving him altogether alone.

CHAPTER TEN

BETTER TO DIE IN THE WILDERNESS THAN—

IT was an utterly indefensible thing which he had done to Constance. Charley realized that he had addressed to her an insult for which there was neither palliation nor apology.

Yet, even in his regrets, he could not escape a pleased satisfaction; his conscience acclaimed him a free personality because he had spoken the truth.

So much of his spiritual liberty, at least, he had made secure. Clearly enough he understood how Constance must now hate him, but he also knew that she could not despise him. He hoped that she would understand, but even with understanding he knew he must not expect forgiveness.

He had acted from the simplest, the most direct and characteristic impulse. He was a fool, and he knew he was a fool. Being a fool, he had no wish to be wise, nor the capacity to wish to be different from what he was. Of an imperfect world, he demanded perfection.

Constance with her lipstick was no more than the snow-scarfed streets of his boyhood, invaded and despoiled by the tracks of laundry wagon wheels.

Both were a violation.

After Constance had gone, in flushed and pride-riven anger, he sat on their bench and mused. Did he, or did he not, abominate mouth rouge? The answer that his brain returned, after judicious analysis, was that he did not. Lipsticks were quite all right in their place. Simply their place was not on the lips of his love. Cissie Stricker might redder her charms with them, and give no offense to her department store swain.

But not his dream woman!

There you had it! There it was! Wasn't it about time to abjure such insane folly? To wake up? To realize that there was not, and could not, in the nature of the universe, be found on earth the perfection he sought?

The best of women used lipsticks. They powdered their noses, and in obscene privacy employed depilatories. They were subject to the mortal mechanism of digestion. They were realities.

Was it not madness to pursue such beckoning and disappointing prayers? The exquisite and gauzy fabric of the love he could imagine for himself was not merely a remote ideal, difficult of achievement; it was a literal impossibility. Women were like that!

Why not take the best the real world had to give him? Surely that best was Constance! She was almost perfection. Why not seek her out? Why not go to her, humbled and contrite, and ask her to forgive?

He doubted if she would forgive. What woman would? Yet she might, if she really loved him.

Charley hesitated. At length he lit a cigarette.

"No!" he said to himself, good-humoredly. "No! I'll be damned if I do!"

In no degree was he blinded to the ridiculous implications of the act he had committed.

In the moment of love's surrender to his plea, he had boxed love on the ears and tweaked love on the nose. It was an incident of which only a lunatic could be proud. Yet, during that kiss, Charley had been engaged not so much in feeling, as he should have been, but in thinking, which was an occupation foreign and inappropriate to the moment.

What feeling he had had was nothing more than a shocked and defeated disillusion. His thoughts had been precise, and their precision had been a warning, an alarm to his soul. When he should have been thrilling with passion, he was,

instead, reflecting that life shared with Constance would ultimately come to be quite as unbearable as life with Clara, day in and day out. Indeed, before the kiss was over, such were the rapid turnings of his thought, he was convinced that he might come to dislike Constance much more than his wife, because he would have been more profoundly disappointed. And for Constance he would never be able to summon forth the graceful salvation of pity.

The situation had the undeniable salt of humor. In spite of telling himself that he should feel like a cad—which he unfortunately did not—Charley could not put down the plaguing smile. When one came to think about it, the incident was droll. Charley wondered if all tragedies were not droll. He failed completely to pity Constance; he forced himself to contemplate the indignity he had put upon her, and managed only to find a devilish unction within, in conceding that her part in the matter was touched with the mask of the comic.

It was easier to contemplate this, because it was he who was really the clown. And what a simpleton of a clown! Now that his devotion to the ideal had been tested in the brazen alembic of circumstance, he could appraise it for the poor stuff that it was. What he was seeking was much more hopeless than the philosopher's stone. After all, chemistry might yet reach an alchemy in which all the baser metals might be transfused into pure gold.

But women?

Ah, there was a different quest altogether. Lipsticks, nose-puffs and depilatories! Ethereal womanhood, shrived of such artifice, was inconceivable. Venus was dead, at the bottom of the sea, and one would need to wait until the resurrection day for her to rise again.

“Very well, then,” he said to himself. “I will wait until resurrection day!”

At his own sensations he could only marvel and be amazed.

Somehow he felt cleansed and bathed in his heart. Uttering the truth was a difficult but splendid experience. He could not bring himself to the normal and conventional mood of regrets. Of course, he would miss Constance. He knew now that he loved her mind and her soul, but that contact with her body had been a betrayal of his ideals. In all else she had been genuine, but he had found her lips a cheat.

That it was all preposterous he was quite assured. Yet having persisted in the preposterous, he felt oddly at home with himself. If his heart was still hungry, he had had the dignity of refusing a stone when he had asked for bread.

In a gravely jocund spirit, he argued within himself.

"Am I a fool to refuse a compromise? Should I not stop being such a dunce?"

Something immutable replied; something comparable to the majestic voice of an organ speaking through the aisles and arches of a deserted cathedral, gave him reply:

"It is better to die in the wilderness than to be despoiled of the Egyptians."

"Very well, then!" he acquiesced. "Very well!"

And a little later, he reflected:

"I shall continue to wander in the wilderness. What do the Philistines matter? Perhaps there may be a promised land, somewhere. Who knows that?"

He shook his head, as if he had found himself incorrigible, and turned to go home.

In getting himself arrested for trespassing on the grass, Henry Stricker was a victim of circumstances.

Legally, his offense was clear. He had violated one of the public park ordinances, which had been passed unanimously by the first and second branches of the city council, and signed by Mayor Venable, who had long since moldered in his grave.

That ordinance was unequivocal. It forbade any human being to implant feet on the grass of the public parks and

squares, under penalty of the law. It is a characteristic method of the city to dispose of all difficulties by the passage of an ordinance. It keeps the first and second branches of the city council from becoming bored. Later, the ordinances keep the police from being bored, and, after them, the station house magistrates.

Of late, members of the City Beautiful Commission had turned to the ordinance, after indignantly observing the flagrant violations of its provisions by unthinking barbarians. The feet of foreigners were tramping the green life out of the parks. To be a member of the City Beautiful Commission, one had to have, not æsthetic background but political influence. In behalf of the ordinance known as "Keep Off the Grass" the commission had swung its political thunder, with the result that park policemen were making arrests, and magistrates were imposing fines—because policemen and magistrates are also politicians and respect political thunder.

Of these circumstances was Henry Stricker a victim. Kneeling on the grass, he became fair game for the park policeman; an instrument by which the officer could show the politicians upon whom he depended that he knew when an ordinance was being violated that the politicians did not want violated.

Henry had walked on a few feet of the several hundred acres of grass in Druid Hill Park, and he was, therefore, carried in an auto patrol to the not unbeautiful red-bricked Jefferson Police Station and lined up in front of a legal brass rail. Enthroned behind the oaken counter was a swag-bellied lieutenant, and two janizaries in blue uniforms.

These men insisted on Henry's revealing his name, and much other personal data, the information being inscribed on a blotter. He was then searched, to determine whether he carried upon his person any deadly weapon.

"He was creeping through the grass," declared the policeman. "He looks like a desperate character!"

At this unwarranted assault upon his good name and char-

acter, Henry burst into tears and passionately demanded permission to telephone his father.

The Lieutenant gravely considered this request before he acquiesced. Finally he allowed Henry to go to the telephone and call up a number on the Wolfe Exchange.

"Helloa, pop!" whimpered Henry. "This is Henry. Say, pop! I'm—I'm—I'm——"

"What?" cried Mr. Stricker irritably.

"I'm—I'm—I'm—*in the station house!*"

"You're what?"

"Station house! I'm arrested. I'm locked up! I'm a prisoner!"

"What?"

"The *police* have got me!"

"The police? Henry! What's the matter?"

"Nothing's the matter!"

"There is something the matter, too! What did you do?"

"I didn't do nothing, pop!"

"Well, but what did you *do*?"

"I walked on the grass in Druid Hill Park!"

"Why, Henry! What did you do such a thing as that, for?"

"I had to, pop! I had to!"

"What for did you have to?"

"Charley!"

"Oh! So Charley is the man who put you behind the bars! I always knew that fellow wasn't any good! He'll be made to feel this, son! You are a martyr, my boy. Where are you?"

"I don't know, pop! I don't know anything about this neighborhood!"

"Well, let me talk to the chief of police!"

Henry, still holding on to the receiver, turned to the Lieutenant.

"Will you please talk to my pop?" he faltered.

The Lieutenant considered the matter sufficiently but at length consented to talk to his prisoner's pop.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

DAY IN, DAY OUT

IF Clara had known that her husband had kissed a girl in the park, and that her brother was under arrest in a police station, her state of mind might have been different from what it was that Saturday afternoon.

Like unto every other typical housewife in the city, Clara was at that moment preparing for one of the great phases of the ritual of typical existence—the Saturday journey to market.

Going to market on Saturday was an obligation little less important than that of going to church on Sunday. It was an enterprise to be approached with a becoming dignity, and a chaste severity.

After the departure of Mr. Harris that forenoon, Clara felt better. Mr. Harris always made her feel better. Clara had never stopped to analyze the effect his weekly visits produced upon her, but if she had, she would have attributed her feeling of upliftment to the godly aura in which Mr. Harris moved. Their vibrations fairly sang together and made a tune of their conversations.

While she was preparing her simple lunch in the kitchen—a meal which, regardless of its simplicity, Clara called “dinner”—she sang various favorites from the Baptist hymnal—*There is a Fountain Filled With Blood*, into which she infused a real soul fervor; *There's a Land That is Fairer Than Day*, which had a rollicking lilt to its melody highly grateful

to her soul, and *In a Lonely Graveyard*, which filled her with a wholly light and pleasant melancholy.

The dishes washed and wiped and stacked back on the kitchen dresser shelves, covered with blue strips of perforated paper, Clara arrayed herself in her second best dress. Out of the closet under the front staircase she took a white wicker basket, almost of laundry proportions, the handle of which she suspended in the crook of her elbow. At the bottom of the basket she put the imitation cut glass bowl which had served at last night's feast. When she was finally assured that the money in her pocketbook was all right, and that she had her list of provisions, she left the house and walked down to the corner, a nickel and two pennies clutched tightly in her hand for car-fare.

She was on her way, a unit in a vast and skirted army, moving on its way, with its hundred thousand white wicker baskets swung on a hundred thousand elbows, from the four points of the compass, all bound for the huge bazaar of vegetables, fish, breads, fruits and meats, which was known wherever people eat as Lexington Market.

Of course, Clara could have gone to Lafayette Market just as well.

Lafayette Market, however, was too familiar an arena for the great adventure of Saturday afternoon. It was only one "square" long; it was only a few "squares" from Clara's house; it was lacking in the majesty of size befitting the occasion when Clara made the biggest purchases of her week.

On Saturday afternoon, the typical housewife lays in provisions for the greater part of the next seven days. Clara, and women like her, never spend so much money in one compressed gesture, at any other time, except in the rare times when furniture or clothing is bought. Thus the week-end market visit is invested with a peculiar importance, not lightly to be regarded. Clara preferred to spend an extra fourteen

cents, though she felt it to be an extravagance, to ride down to the central market of the town,—the far-flung, pitched-roofed sheds that extend from Eutaw to Pine Streets.

When Clara got on a Carey Street car, she observed with satisfaction that there were about fourteen other women on board, all with their wicker baskets, and all bound for the same destination. It pleased Clara to feel that she belonged in the same procession with them; that she was typical, like all the rest of them, and in serene conformity with their customs.

As she left the street car with the rest of the typical housewives and their baskets, and walked a block to the market, Clara was flushed and tingled with anticipation. This was adventure.

Her first stop was at Kenny's tea, coffee and sugar store. From her earliest girlhood, Clara had gone to Kenny's on Saturday afternoons. It was something to be looked forward to, because there was always a premium distributed on the market day. One Saturday, a colored vase of clay, on which an angelic maiden would be leading an insane sheep around a yellow bed-post, would be given away. Next week a cardboard whistle would be forthcoming with each purchase, or a fan, or perhaps a pencil sharpener. Until this very Saturday afternoon Clara still felt the childhood thrill as she crossed the threshold of the store; she was still wondering what Kenny's would give out *this* week.

With a smile to the bald-headed clerk in his shirt sleeves who always waited on her, and who remembered her when she was a little girl, Clara gave her order. She bought two pounds of sugar, one pound of Mocha and Java mixed coffee, unground—Clara used an old-fashioned kitchen coffee mill, with a squeaky handle—and a quarter of a pound of Ceylon tea.

With this and the premium—a long paper scroll of red and yellow roses, with a brass eyelet at the top for suspension

purposes—Clara walked out of Kenny's, her basket on her arm, ready for the market.

The neighborhood in which she found herself was a tumult of hawking cries, the sonorous snorts of trucks and automobiles, the rumble of wheels, the crash and clamor of street cars, the shrill whistle of peanut-roasters, and the mingled smells of raw foods. For blocks, or "squares," in all directions ranged temporary stalls and booths, covered with gray, patched canvas, where men in their shirt sleeves and trousers of corduroy, sold vegetables and fruits and poultry—the outer fringe of market folk, not so prosperous that they could afford stalls under the big sheds.

With these Clara perversely refused to traffic. Her custom went to recognized dealers, with painted signs above their stalls in the market proper.

Crossing the asphalt street, through a litter of lost food and waste paper, Clara entered the first of the long market houses, extending for three blocks—an arcade of three parallel ranges, the center with lifted roof devoted to an unbroken and bloody array of meat stalls, flanked on either side with lower-roofed vistas of vegetables, fruits and other edibles.

No society woman entering a ball-room was ever prouder or happier than Clara upon her weekly entrance into the cool and vast arena of the Lexington meat market. The fresh animal smell of the stalls was as incense to her nostrils. The stalls, stretching away as far as the eye could reach, were brilliantly illuminated with fly-specked electric bulbs, above which glistened freshly painted signs, bearing the owner's name and an expressionistic rendering of the nature of his business; the sallow countenance of a lamb, or the melancholy fore-face of a bull.

Upon everything there was the dull red tone of dead flesh and dried blood. Piled upon the marble slabs, and the cotton covers with their scarlet smears, were ponderous haunches of red beef and sickly yellow suet; purple rolls of lamb and

veal, pyramids of sausages, bologna, skinned pigs swinging from iron hooks, beeves with a crimson slit down their middles, their two halves thrust apart with wooden sticks,—meat in pounds and tons arrayed, decked with the withering branches of trees to keep the flies away.

The sound of steel saws, cutting splinteringly through bones; the hack of the cleaver on wooden blocks, the buzz of the electric chopper, eternally mincing rejected cuts into Hamburger, the shrill voices of women raised in bargain and badinage, made the long, high vaulted passage echo with incoherence.

There was the heavy smell of opened ice-boxes in the air, combatting the warm, sanguine odor of carved red flesh. Around Clara's feet two black cats spat at each other, and then raced away, to disappear under the dark cavern of a stall; a moment later, a long, gray rat—long as from Clara's finger-tips to her elbow—scampered from one counter to another with a defiant screech.

Clara had her own meat men—one who dealt in beef, another in lamb and veal. From these it was her custom to buy the *piece de resistance* of the Sunday noon meal, usually a roast of one kind, or another. Mr. Fowler, who kept the beef stall, was more like a friend. Clara met him every Sunday in church; they were fellow members.

"I want a roast to-day, Mr. Fowler," Clara explained with a smile.

As he exhumed a shaky chunk of meat for her inspection, Mr. Fowler asked cheerfully regarding Charley's health.

"Just the same as ever!" replied Clara seriously.

"Still can't get him to follow the Lord, eh?" clucked the butcher, as he set the meat swaying on the whitely enameled scales.

"Still can't get him to follow the Lord," confirmed Clara, with a martyr's glance upward to the roof.

"Keep on praying!" laughed Mr. Fowler. "That's what

Preacher Wharton says, you know. Keep on praying and the Lord will hear. That will be just one dollar and thirty-seven cents!"

When the roast was deposited in her basket, Clara bade Mr. Fowler good day, and passed on to another stall, where canned meats of many kinds were retailed. Clara did not like to deal with this man, because he was a Jew. She always said, apologetically, to her neighbors: "I hate to deal with that curly-haired sheeny, but he has the best chip beef in the market, and I've tried them all—week in and week out, I've tried them all!"

The delicacy known as chip beef—highly seasoned canned beef, sliced to the thinness of tissue paper—was the invariable chief ingredient of Clara's cold supper on Sunday nights.

The time had now arrived for Clara to turn into the left corridor—a region where the products of the neighboring truck farms were tumbled in prodigal and odorous profusion. Old women whose red cheeks glistened beneath blue aprons tied around their heads; plump and ripe young maidens; unshaven farmers, bearded old men and little boys and girls all were pressed into the business of selling these vegetables.

And what vegetables were not there? Baskets and boxes and bags and sacks and barrels and pans and pots and buckets and troughs and wheelbarrows of vegetables—red, ripe tomatoes, brown, dusty potatoes, white and purple turnips, bundles of asparagus tied with a string, lima beans, string beans, wet green heads of luscious lettuce, green peas, blood-red beets with bobbing green plumes, juicy white corn exposed where the green and golden wrappings had been gashed with a knife, long white spring onions with emerald tops, ridged pepper bulbs of crimson and green, huge purple eggplants, fat yellow squashes, cabbages, spinach, kale and carrots, parsnips, parsley, celery, rhubarb, and cauliflower, and okra.

And fruits! The Italians, who monopolized this business, were not content with the rich fruitage of the Eastern Shore

and the orchards of Western Maryland; their province embraced all the gardens of the land, and on their stalls, decked with gayly-tinted oilcloths, were heaped the spring and summer treasures of the earth. Golden and red bananas from the Bermudas; oranges from California, and lemons from Florida; dates and pomegranates out of the odorous East; royal grapes from king's gardens, scarlet persimmons, apples, peaches, pears, little golden nuggets of yellow tomatoes, water melons, cantalopes, strawberries, blackberries, huckleberries, raspberries, gooseberries, figs from queen's acres, prickly pineapples with cactus tops, red cherries with taunting stems, hundreds of thousands of berries and fruits, flung in prodigal heaps for the hundred thousand typical housewives and their empty wicker baskets.

Nor were these all. There were bread stalls, heaped high with brown rolls, raisin breads, cakes, pretzels on woolen strings, and buckets of iced cookies. There were candy merchants, with a colorful display of brown, and green, and pink taffies in flat tin pans; jars of red-striped peppermint sticks and brown horehound strips; spreads of peanut "brittle" and great glass casks of chocolate drops.

Through this long vista of foods trudged Clara, up one side of the market and down the other, pausing at one familiar booth after another, her basket growing fuller and heavier at each stop. The glass bowl was filled with a creamy paste known as schmierkäse, a sour delicacy which Charley passionately detested. As her deliberately chosen final purchase, Clara bought ten cents' worth of mixed taffy, tapped out of the tin pans by the gray-haired candy man with a small iron mallet.

Aching from the weight of her basket, she hurried with short, quick steps to the corner and waited for the crowded car which would take her—and a load of other typical housewives—home from the noisy market.

And that was the way Saturday afternoon was, week in and week out.

"No wise man is ever governed by his first impulses. *God is on the side of the man who thinks!*"

This was the impressive utterance which Mr. Stricker delivered to Henry, as they rode in the street car to the Stricker dwelling in the Northeast section.

There had been a disagreeable interlude at the Jefferson Police Station, where Mr. Stricker, by depositing the maximum amount of the fine, had reclaimed his tearful son from the clutch of the law.

Mr. Stricker had expressed his feelings to the Lieutenant forcibly and with dignity. Whereupon the Lieutenant had expressed his feelings with even more force and with infinitely more dignity. Mr. Stricker had retorted in kind. The Lieutenant had then threatened to lock up the father and son in the same cell.

Mr. Stricker had instantly relapsed into a red and perfect silence.

Later, while waiting for the street car, he had heard the whole story, with much shaking of his head, and clearing of his throat.

"It's all Charley's fault," he said decisively. "That's what those kind of things always lead to. A man who deserts the straight and narrow path of virtue brings sorrow upon all his loved ones. To think of Charley Turner out in the park with a woman! I knew it! I knew it!"

"Are you going to tell Clara?" asked Henry hopefully.

It was at this juncture that Mr. Stricker instructed his son in the wisdom of reflection, and defined God's position with respect to men who think.

CHAPTER TWELVE

EXPOSED!

CHARLEY walked home.

Under the swing of the exuberance which filled him, he set off valiantly through the curving walks of Druid Hill Park, making toward the brown and ancient entrance at the end of Madison Avenue. It was out of the way, but he was finding himself such companionable company that he elected to prolong the experience.

Over the slopes of the park paths he walked, rapidly, and almost gayly. All the way was familiar, for he loved the old park. It was one of the few places in the city to which he rendered ungrudging homage. He knew its remote corners, off toward Woodberry way, as well as most people knew the boat lake, with its miniature house, and its miniature green trees on a miniature gray island. Under the proud vista of high encountering poplars on the Mall he and Clara had walked in their courtship days. They had walked around the reservoir on cool May nights, and kissed under the stingy monument to Columbus. In ferned dells they had whispered their love; they had ordered soda water in the Mansion House, relic of the days before 1860 when the seven hundred acres of gentle green slopes were not a park, but an estate. Together, Clara and he had watched the flock of gray sheep grazing on the hillsides, herded by a bearded shepherd, a very Walt Whitman of a fellow, and his barking terrier.

Out of the park after an hour's tramping, he hurried south on the western side of Madison Avenue, where the three-

storied houses with the white marble steps shut out the setting sun and cast the sidewalk in pleasant shadow. By this time he was humming to himself; a certain emotional sign. His heart was singing in shameless elation.

He had forgotten that he was a coward and a fool.

He was curiously and perversely pleased.

As Charley was walking homeward, and as Clara was unpacking her market basket on the kitchen table, there was a family conference of the most weighty importance in the house of Mr. Stricker.

Something had to be done.

With his accustomed sagacity, Mr. Stricker had stage-managed the convocation artfully. Until Mrs. Stricker had emptied her market-basket—she was just returning from the Belair Market when Mr. Stricker and Henry reached home—nothing was said. Cissie and Cousin Elsie were maneuvered into taking a walk, for John Stricker realized the problem they were to face should not be published into the ears of innocent girls.

As it happened, Cissie and Cousin Elsie accepted the hint without protest. Cissie had just borrowed from a pal in the Eastern High School a copy of *Women In Love* and was anxious to acquaint Cousin Elsie with its iniquities.

The conference was held in the front second-story bedroom, with Mrs. Stricker sitting in a rocking chair by the window, Henry lolling on the nuptial bed of his parents, and Mr. Stricker, in a portentous attitude held within the angle of the bureau mirror, to which he cast occasional glances of critical inquiry.

All of the dreadful story had been told, an attack of hysteria being averted in Mrs. Stricker only by the husbandly eloquence of Mr. Stricker. It was her daughter, Mrs. Stricker gaspingly explained, of whom she was thinking. Her daughter! Her own dear daughter Clara!

"And what about me?" asked Henry indignantly.

The question was almost fatal. Did he think his mother had forgotten? Her son, her Henry, to have been arrested and taken to a station house!

Until Mrs. Stricker began to speak the stark tragedy of the affair had been partly obscured in the minds of father and son. But Mrs. Stricker banished the haze in a rainfall of weeping. The family was disgraced, first by Charley Turner's wicked behavior with a woman, and second by the arrest of Henry, for which Charley Turner was wholly to blame.

"It would never have happened," Mrs. Stricker declared at frequent intervals, "if Charley Turner hadn't carried on his onriness!"

"I never liked Charley. I never did like him!" was Henry's mindful contribution. "I never have any use for anybody that hasn't any use for his job. I like my job. And Charley ought to like his job. And if he doesn't like it, then the thing for him to do is to get out! He doesn't even call it a job. He calls it a grind, and with a swear word in front of it that begins with a d and ends with an n!"

"Oh, Henry!" fluttered his mother. "Don't!"

"So he calls the brush business a grind, does he?" said Mr. Stricker, between pursed lips. "A grind? A grind? I know what he ought to be told. *No job is grinding, if it is lubricated with interest and enthusiasm!*"

"Gee, pop!"

Henry sat up on the bed, and stared in open-mouthed admiration.

"Is that an original, pop?"

Mr. Stricker smiled sheepishly.

"That," he said, clearing his throat, "is an original, Henry. And I hope you remember it as you battle your way through this old life!"

At the moment, however, Mrs. Stricker had no ears for originals, no matter how clever they might be. Her heart was

bleeding for her arrested son and her betrayed daughter, and her nerves wouldn't stand much more.

"Couldn't you hear what they were talking about on that bench?"

"No, mom! I didn't have time," pleaded Henry, at once defensive. "I was just settling myself to listen when——"

"Oh!" cried Mrs. Stricker brokenly, and Henry said no more.

"The same principles that govern the great business man in his mundane affairs must guide us here," said Mr. Stricker, expanding his chest and glancing swiftly at the mirror. "We must plan our work. And then—*we must work our plan!*"

"Oh, John," fluttered Mrs. Stricker gratefully, "what would we all do without you!"

"No one of us is indispensable, my dear," replied Mr. Stricker, with a deprecatory flutter of his hand. "But I do try to be practical. I try to keep awake. And a man has got to keep awake to-day, or the world will pass him by. Something has to be done. Clara is our daughter. We cannot see her deceived by her own husband. Clara has got to be told!"

"Of course she's got to be told!" cried Mrs. Stricker, flushing darkly.

"I guess she has!" crowed Henry, settling himself more comfortably on the bed.

John Stricker stuck his thumbs into his vest-holes and paraded slowly back and forth, his chin touching his tie-knot in deepest and most solemn cogitation.

"We must decide upon the *best* way to tell her," he mused aloud. "And *who*!"

"I'll tell her, pop!" said Henry eagerly. "I was there and saw the whole thing. I can tell her what that Jane looks like, and everything. When Clara knows what's up, she'll want first-hand information!"

Mr. Stricker paused, a depressed look in his eyes. His

glance encountered that of his wife and there passed a mutual compact between them.

"No, Henry," said his father decisively. "It is courageous of you, my boy, to suggest it. I know how your heart aches for your sister in this bitter hour. I know that you would like to comfort her. But this is a matter entirely too delicate for a young man to talk about to his sister."

He paused and blew his nose explosively.

"No, Henry," he said, with finality. "I couldn't permit it. It is a disagreeable duty, my son. But fathers all through history have had to do disagreeable things. I am not the first father in the world who dared to do his plain duty. I shall face the situation like a man and a Christian. *I shall tell her!*"

A suppressed gulp came from Mrs. Stricker as she rose tragically and confronted her husband.

"John," she said tremulously. "In a time like this a girl needs her *mother*. I know Clara as only a mother knows her own daughter. You have been a good father, John, and I admire your fine spirit. But this is a mother's place—a time when a girl needs her mother as she never needed her before!"

A baffled light came into Mr. Stricker's eyes.

"But my love," he protested. "You won't be able to stand the ordeal. Your nerves are not the best, and you know it. I couldn't think of letting you do it!"

"She is my daughter! I am her mother!" wailed Mrs. Stricker. "I will, John! It's my place!"

"Wait!" cried Mr. Stricker, as if favored with an inspiration from on high. "We'll both go to her! She'll need us both!"

Mrs. Stricker put her head against the vest pocket in which her husband kept his cigars, and wept copiously. But Henry rose indignantly from the bed.

"Gee, pop!" he remonstrated. "I ought to go along with you. I found out all about this thing!"

"Let the boy go!" pleaded Mrs. Stricker.

It was thus decided that all three should go upon the expedition to the home of Charley and Clara.

Out in Guilford, Constance Lane sat in front of her mirror, and erased the traces of her rage and tears.

"The cheap little fool!" she said to herself. "I should have known him for what he was all along. Why didn't I say something to him? Just a *poseur*—and an ignorant, middle class *poseur*! I not worthy of him! The creature! Striking attitudes before me! Posturing! A middle-class imitation, nothing more! I'm glad I found him out in time!"

She pensively toyed with a golden lipstick, then, with an angry grimace, threw it into the waste-basket.

Supper was over.

Charley was sitting in the dining room, with his feet against the mantelpiece, blowing into his ocarino a long, weird strain from the Scheherezade Suite of Rimski-Korsakoff.

Clara was in the kitchen, splashing her hands in luke-warm dish water, gray and greasy.

The door bell rang.

Charley continued to blow into his instrument, unaware of the vindictive and contemptuous glance which Clara bestowed upon him as she passed through the dining room to open the front door.

At the sound of low voices, Charley interrupted his melody. He recognized the throaty greeting of his father-in-law, the thin voice of his mother-in-law, and the whine of his brother-in-law. Despair crossed his face like a cloud. They had been there only the night before. What were they coming again for?

A moment later, the three visitors, their faces somber and portentous, entered the dining room.

"Good evening!" said Charley, without lowering his feet.

"Good evening, Charley," said Mr. Stricker gravely.

"Hi, there!" said Henry.

Mrs. Stricker refused to glance at her son-in-law, or to acknowledge his existence.

Clara came in and urged them all to be seated. She was plainly puzzled at the unexpected call, but was too polite to make inquiries.

"Clara," said Mr. Stricker, after an ungainly pause, "we have come here on a very disagreeable duty!"

Mrs. Stricker began to weep.

"What do you mean, pop?" asked Clara, with an anxious glance at Charley. It was evident that she feared her husband was to be discharged at last.

"No man could be sorrier for what I've got to say than your own father," declared Mr. Stricker. "I would rather cut off my right hand than tell what it is my plain duty, as your father, to tell you!"

"You're going to get rid of Charley!" exclaimed Clara in a whisper.

"Oh, Clara!" wept Mrs. Stricker. "Come into your mother's arms!"

With a wild glance at them all, Clara stood her ground.

"Go on, pop!" she said. "Tell me!"

"My daughter," said Mr. Stricker, again clearing his throat, and twisting at his brushy mustache, "I must ask you to be brave. You must be brave enough to know the truth. *For the truth shall make us free!* . . . We have come over here, Clara, to tell you something about your husband!"

"Would you prefer that I retire?" asked Charley.

"No!" exclaimed Mr. Stricker, with conscious courage. "John Stricker has never said a word behind a man's back that he would not say to his face!"

"That is an original," said Charley. "Proceed!"

"Put your feet down!" said Clara poisonously, but Charley did not disturb his pose.

"Do proceed!" persisted Charley, who was innocently wondering what Mr. Stricker meant to disclose.

"I have received certain information," continued Mr. Stricker, "which no father, placed as I find myself placed, could conceal. I must tell it. This information is absolutely reliable. It is strictly correct!"

"Well, what is it?" prodded Charley, querulously.

"Clara," said Mr. Stricker, turning to address himself directly to his daughter, "I am sorry to say that you are being badly treated by your husband!"

"Don't I know it?" shrilled Clara.

"You don't know this. Ask him where he spent this afternoon!"

"Yes, just ask him that!" echoed Henry.

Mrs. Stricker continued to weep.

A blanket of silence fell upon them, while Clara's shoulders were hunched; her writhing hands clasped themselves together in front of her, and she stared at her husband.

"Well," she snapped at last. "Where were you this afternoon?"

From the moment the Strickers had come into his dining room Charley had been wondering until John Stricker propounded that riddle. Then Charley knew. The meaning of their solemn visit became clear. It did not matter to him how they had come upon the facts. They were there to tell Clara of Constance.

He could not restrain a smile. It was a smile of amusement at the inexcusable drollery of events. As long as he wooed Constance, no one suspected. But when he dismissed her—

"Why don't you answer?" cried Clara shrilly.

"Yes! Why don't you?" added Henry.

"Perhaps it would be more interesting if your father told you," replied Charley.

"Well, I'll tell her!" screamed Mrs. Stricker, rising and approaching Clara with outstretched arms.

"I'll tell you, Clara, where that man was and what he was doing. He was out in the park with another *woman*!"

"And I saw him!" cried Henry.

"Yes, my daughter!" said Mr. Stricker. "That is where he was, and that was what he was doing. And Henry did see him! *Thy sin shall find thee out!*"

In the five minutes that followed, Charley was obliterated.

Clara moaned and wept in her mother's arms, mingling her tears and beating her breasts. Henry sat with folded arms staring accusingly at his brother-in-law, while Mr. Stricker went on tiptoe into the kitchen, shook his head dismally at the dish-pan, and drew Clara a glass of water.

At every other moment, Clara threatened to faint. She refused the water which her father tried to thrust upon her. She hugged her mother, and loudly cried that she wished she had died before she ever left her home.

By degrees her hysteria relented, and she became measurably calm. Then her mother and her father and her brother remained silent as she stood up and confronted her husband.

"I don't know why God doesn't strike you dead!" she said chokingly.

Mrs. Stricker murmured sympathetically.

"Haven't you anything to say for yourself?" asked Mr. Stricker in a tone that indicated his desire to be judicious at all costs.

Charley slowly drew down his feet, until they touched the floor. Then he stood up, putting the chair away from him as he rose. He turned his back upon the mantelpiece, and leaned his shoulders negligently against it.

He was not smiling, but there was a twinkle in his eye.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said. "I thank you!"

Mrs. Stricker gave a gasp or horror at his calm impudence, and then resumed a violent sobbing.

Mr. Stricker's face grew red with anger.

Henry Stricker sniffed with a contempt that was almost frankly feminine.

"Now!" screamed Clara. "Now you just listen to him. Now you'll hear the kind of man I've slaved for, day in and day out, ever since I've been married to him!"

"Clara is right!" said Charley crisply. "If you will steel yourselves to listen, you will hear speaking the kind of man for whom she *has* slaved, day in and day out. But can I count on your listening?"

He glanced at them inquiringly.

"You're not worth listening to!" declared old Mrs. Stricker savagely. "You're not fit to black her shoes!"

"If you have anything to say, we will hear you," said Mr. Stricker pontifically.

"I have very little to say," said Charley. "And what little it is, I am afraid you will not understand. You must not mistake my sincere gratitude for insolence. Believe me, my dear in-laws, I am thankful. You have told Clara what I greatly wanted her to know, but lacked the courage to tell her. Please——"

He checked a fomenting explosion of comment by a gesture.

"You promised to listen. I shall not detain you long. You have told Clara that I was out in the park this afternoon with a woman. That is, unfortunately, both the fact and the truth. There is a difference. If I had known that I was out in the park this afternoon with another woman, I should never have gone there!"

"Well, of all the nerve!" exclaimed Henry. "That's the limit, Charley. She had on a dress! You couldn't help knowing it was a woman!"

"The liar!" exclaimed Clara.

"He can't think what to say," declared Mrs. Stricker, giving her daughter's waist an extra squeeze.

"I should have known she was a woman, of course," conceded Charley patiently. "But there, you see, was my weakness. I did not think she was a woman. I thought she was a goddess. Now please! Let me proceed, no matter how much I upset you. I am frank to say to this assembled gathering of my wife and her relatives that I am a most unfortunately married man. Clara and I are not suited. We should not live together at all, because we are violating decency in sleeping in the same bed when we don't love each other. I tried to find some one else, and I thought I had. But I was not looking for another woman. I was looking for a dream girl, a creature out of my dreams. And I thought the lady of my afternoon adventure was that. I found, to my despair, that she was just what you have most aptly described her—just another woman! You are all unduly excited. The lady has gone out of my life. We shall not meet again. The experiment was a failure, you see. So why the consternation?"

"You red-haired wretch!" cried Mrs. Stricker.

Charley laughed, and the sound of his laughter vibrated into Clara's soul and set it off.

"You laugh!" she shrieked. "You good-for-nothing hound, you laugh at me! Laugh at me, you dog, laugh at your wife, who slaves for you on her knees, doing all the work of this house with my own two hands, cleaning your floors, cooking your meals, washing your dirty clothes, going without everything, and all that, and you laugh at me, you *dare* to laugh at me, and go running around this town with some common woman, and you laugh at me, and you let her laugh at me, too, I guess, you good-for-nothing thing you; it's a wonder God don't strike you dead in your chair!"

Her hands were tearing at her dress, the words fairly tumbled from her mouth, and her eyes were glittering.

"No!" replied Charley, not argumentatively. "I have never laughed at you, Clara. You are not amusing. You are distressing!"

Clara leaped at him with outstretched fingers and clawed at his cheeks. He took her wrists and held her, squirming in his grasp.

"Don't you lay the weight of your little finger on my daughter!" said Mr. Stricker, stalking across the floor.

"Well, you hold her then!" suggested Charley.

Clara wrenched herself free, and retreated, panting, to her mother's side.

"Oh, my God!" she wailed. "Oh, my God!"

"The neighbors will hear you," Mr. Stricker warned, in a worried tone.

"I don't care who hears me!" howled Clara, louder than before. "I hope they do hear me! They ought to know what he is. Oh, my God!"

Mr. Stricker turned appealingly to Charley.

"Why don't you go to her?" he pleaded. "Why don't you ask her to forgive you? This thing can be straightened out. *There never was a tangle that couldn't be untangled.* Go on, Charley, before she gets worse!"

"But you made the tangle, Mr. Stricker," said Charley respectfully.

"Not I, my boy! You made the tangle by falling from the path of duty! I have only done my duty. And in this life God expects every man to do his duty!"

"Then do your duty!" encouraged Charley.

"My duty is to——"

"Pardon me! Perhaps I can enlighten you. Your duty is to advise Clara to separate from such a black sheep as I. Mr. Stricker, try to be practical. I am entirely discontented with my wife, my job. I want a change. I have wanted to tell Clara that, but I pitied her so much, I couldn't be cruel enough to tell her. You didn't mind. Now that's done, I can

only be grateful. Clara will get over this, and afterward she will be far happier. A divorce——”

“Divorce!” repeated Mr. Stricker thunderously.

“Divorce!” screamed Mrs. Stricker.

“Oh, my God! Divorce!” wailed Clara.

Henry sniffed again.

“Look here, young man!” said Mr. Stricker, his tone deadly. “Do you wish to fasten disgrace upon my family? No one of us has ever gone through the scandal of a divorce court, and God helping us, no one of us ever will. It is the curse of this day that such a thing as divorce is permitted at all. Divorce is never right. God and the church are against it. ‘Whom God hath joined together, let no man put asunder!’ You are not a Christian, but praise be to God, from Whom all blessings flow, *we are!* We are under the banner of the Baptist church. We would never be able to hold up our heads again. Divorce! Never!”

“You mean that you will keep me a prisoner in this marriage?” asked Charley, tense and torn at last.

“I mean my daughter will never be a divorced woman!” thundered Mr. Stricker.

“A divorced woman!” screamed Clara. “Oh, my God! I can’t stand that! I can’t stand it! Nothing can ever be the same again, now. It’s all over now! I can’t stand it. I won’t stand it. I’m going to kill myself, I tell you; I’m going to kill myself!”

She sprang up toward the buffet, her hands rattling noisily among the knives in a drawer.

“The family need not be alarmed,” said Charley. “We can’t cut bread with those knives, so Clara is perfectly safe in playing with them!”

“Gee, what a brute!” cried Henry.

“Clara, put down the knives,” said Charley. “You know you are play-acting now. You don’t want to kill yourself. Be reasonable for once. You know we can’t agree. I don’t

love you, and you only imagine that you love me. There is no reason for you to commit suicide under the circumstances, really. Divorce is quite respectable these days—even Baptist ministers practice it!"

"It *is* a wonder God doesn't strike him dead," said Mrs. Stricker.

Clara glared at him, like a trapped animal. Then, with a rush, she ran across the room, out into the kitchen. They heard the fleet ascent of her feet up the back stairs, and the slam of the bathroom door.

"What is she doing?" asked Mr. Stricker nervously.

"There are some bichloride of mercury tablets in the medicine chest," said Charley speculatively.

The sound of Clara's feet, racing down the back stairs was followed by her precipitous return into their company.

"I am going to swallow these!" she announced fiercely, holding up a bottle of the deadly tablets.

"Clara! Put that down!" shouted her father.

"No, I won't!" she screamed. "I'm going to swallow these unless Charley makes me stop!"

"Charley! Make her stop at once!" thundered Mr. Stricker. Charley sat down.

"I can't do that!" he said. "That would be a compromise with my soul. It would mean something. It would mean that I was making it up with Clara, as you might phrase it. Well, I am resolved not to make it up with Clara. This time I am going through. I want to separate from Clara, and if I am the only one that can stop her from killing herself, she's dead already!"

A scream of horror came from Clara's twitching lips.

"You devil!" she shrieked. "I'd *rather* die!"

Before any one could reach her, her hand was at her mouth.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE PROSPECT OF ADVENTURE

"STOP her, Charley! Quick! Before your wife dies in front of your eyes! Charley!"

Mr. Stricker was shouting. But Charley remained unmoved. Smilingly, and quite without contempt, he continued to look upon the frenzied face of his wife.

With a sweeping gesture, Clara put the box of poison tablets on the dining room table.

"No!" she cried throatily, oracularly. "No! I'm too good for you, Charley Turner. You're not worthy of me. Why should I kill myself for a thing like you? No! No! Never! Never!"

Whereupon she moaned piteously and awkwardly fainted in her mother's arms.

As they carried Clara to the couch of faded green imitation velour, she was a pale, disheveled and genuinely unconscious woman. Charley felt she had never appeared so homely before; so unfeminine, so graceless. Mr. Stricker unbuttoned Clara's shoes, dropping a big tear on the broken tip of one. Mrs. Stricker unfastened her waist and chafed her neck and forehead with a damp towel which Henry had thoughtfully obtained.

Only Charley was useless and without a part to play in the ministrations.

The state of Charley's mind during the hubbub of restoring Clara back to her conscious life was uncontrite and uncom-

fortable. In him was a scorn of which he felt he ought to be ashamed. Under such circumstances, a man ordinarily would have been filled with pity and concern. Instead, his thoughts were busily stirring with other matters. He felt detached from the situation. And he felt this detachment was spiritually disgraceful.

Yet it was curiously like him, too, to be gadding imaginatively while his wife was in a faint. His mind insisted on holding a reception for a troop of grotesque fancies. At the moment, he was occupied with an odd and abstruse speculation. He was thinking about a duel. He pictured two men, garbed in the brown and stiffly formal fashion of the days immediately preceding the Civil War. Face to face he saw them; the polite preliminaries were gallantly performed; they leveled and aimed two old derringers. Instead of sighting at vulnerable spots in the anatomy of his antagonist, each duelist pointed the muzzle of his weapon directly at the muzzle of his foeman's pistol. The result, Charley fancied, would be inevitable. The two pistol balls would collide midway in air.

Then what would happen?

Here was a most interesting speculation. Would the balls flatten each other in their comet-like encounter? Would their momentum lift them upward, sidewise or downward? It beguiled his curiosity to wonder upon this problem. Upon such senseless themes his mind would turn invariably when his quarrels with Clara became no longer argument, but angry billingsgate.

It was an hour before tranquillity had been restored to Clara.

Meanwhile, Charley had uttered only a few words, but these had been sufficient to intensify the crisis in his domestic affairs.

"It is time we talked common sense," he said, with a placating glance toward them all. "We should try to reach what might be termed a strictly Stricker understanding. You can

see that Clara is not satisfied. I have dawdled along, but now, at last, I am sure. The lady with whom I spent the afternoon made me sure. But I am not in love with the lady. I never expect to see her again. If it will ease your fears in any degree, let me assure you that our relations have been most chaste!

"Hmpf!" said Henry Stricker.

"I am sorry that the prospect of a divorce is so distasteful to your religious feelings," continued Charley, unmindful of Henry's bold skepticism. "It is a simple and practical device, which civilized man will ultimately employ quite as freely as now he adopts the insane expedient of marriage. However, I am resolved. If you will not give me a divorce, I shall go away, anyhow. I do not know what I am going to do. But this sort of thing is intolerable to me. I feel sure there is some real work in the world for me; something more to my liking than clerking in a brush factory."

Mr. Stricker cleared his throat indignantly.

"You may be glad to come back to that old brush factory," he said, a dark flush on his cheeks. "It's an honest place, young man; the brushes are good brushes, and I'm not a profiteer."

"I understand," said Charley easily. "You built it up from nothing, and now look at it. But I hardly think I shall return to brushes. At all events, by this time you should understand my feelings. A reconciliation with Clara is quite impossible. I don't want to be reconciled. I don't want to fool her, or fool myself, any longer. She may desire it. But she will get over that. I do not desire it. There is no other woman. There is no occasion for her heart to be broken. The other woman is gone. She has served her purpose. She has taught me to be strong. She has taught me to be true to my dreams and impulses and convictions and desires. That is all. I am going away. I shall continue to send Clara money when I am settled, and I hope you will not take it amiss if I say

that I do not want to see Clara, or her mother, or her father, or Cissie, or Henry, or Cousin Elsie, ever again so long as I live—so please your God!"

This outburst threw Clara into a renewed spasm of hysteria. Not until treated with aromatic spirits of ammonia, Florida water, and smelling salts was she calmed.

Charley left the room in the midst of it, seeking solace in the little back room upstairs, where he attempted the extrication of the Chopin funeral dirge out of his ocarino.

Mr. Stricker's mood was portentous.

"I want to talk with you, Clara," he announced.

Upon the silent departure of Charley from the company, a singular and almost instant change was observed in Clara. Her hysterical ended abruptly. Her weeping and her sobbing were discarded. She became practical and serious. One might have concluded that her dramatics had been mere stage-play, designed to evoke pity in her husband.

"There's not going to be any divorce in *this* family," proclaimed Mr. Stricker, heavily.

"I guess there *ain't!*" agreed Mrs. Stricker. "Who God hath joined together, let nobody put asunder!"

"That's in the Bible," Henry explained. "And besides, as pop always says, if you've made your bed, you've got to lay in it, that's all!"

"He can't get a divorce if I don't let him, can he?" asked Clara.

"Indeed, he can't. I just guess he can't," her father assured her comfortably. "So far as that is concerned, we've got him just where he ought to be. You've been a good, Christian wife to him, and he ought to be ashamed of himself, the way he carries on. But he can't squirm. If he won't support you, the laws in this state will put him in jail. But there's more to it than just that. I am afraid of what he's likely to do."

He's erratic, Charley is. I'm afraid he'll bring some kind of disgrace on us all."

"You never can tell what Charley will do," intoned Clara drearily.

"There's something got to be done about it," said Mr. Stricker. He tugged at his mustaches aggrievedly. "And something's going to be done about it. I've got an idea already. I have never known the time when I needed an inspiration that one didn't come. And one's coming now!"

He spread his red hands on his knees, and, leaning forward toward Clara, he said huskily:

"I've got a plan in my mind that ain't ready for hatching yet, Clara. I can't tell you all about it yet. And I don't want to tell you anything, unless you promise me absolutely that you won't breathe a word of it to him."

Clara sucked her teeth vindictively.

"I'll never tell him another thing so long as *I* live," she promised vehemently.

"Well," continued Mr. Stricker, "I probably feel different than the rest of you about all this. I don't condemn Charley. My mind don't operate that way. I believe in psychology. It's not what you do that matters; it's why you do it, Clara. Now why is Charley behaving the way he is? That's the question. I ask you, why is he? I tell you, I don't think we ought to blame Charley so much as we do."

"You don't!" cried Mrs. Stricker shrilly. "Why, John——"

"Well, I blame him, pop," said Henry virtuously, unrolling a strip of chewing gum.

"Hmpf!" said Clara, with a cold glance at her father.

"Well, now, I don't," persisted Mr. Stricker, stubbornly. "It looks bad for him. I realize that. But just the same, down in his heart I believe Charley is all right. I believe that every human being is all right, down underneath. Charley is a little foolish; that's what's the matter with him. If he had been running around with another woman, and

that was all there was to it, why then I'd think different about it. Then I'd know he was a sinner, and I'd pray for his salvation. But there's more *to* it than that, I tell you. There's something *deeper* that you all haven't seen. Do you realize that there stood a man, in this very room, watching his wife raise a killing dose of poison to her mouth and he never lifting a finger——”

Mr. Stricker paused. Momentarily, the recollection of that appalling moment overcame him.

“I've been studying Charley lately. I have come to a conclusion about him. I don't want to hurt your feeling about your own husband, Clara——”

“Go on, pop!”

“Gee, pop, go on!”

“Go on, John, what is it?”

“Well, I hate to say it, but I think he's—well, *queer*. That's what I think about Charley.”

“You think he's crazy?” gasped Clara, a shining gleam in her blood-shot eyes.

“You think Charley is crazy?” repeated Mrs. Stricker, a distinct note of pleasure in her voice.

“Bug-house? Loco? Dippy?” cried Henry, pleasantly aghast at this novel sensation.

“I do think his mind is affected,” declared Mr. Stricker virtuously. “That is why I do not condemn him. I do not think he is responsible. Just think a minute. Is Charley like anybody in the world that we know? Doesn't he act and talk different from anybody else? Doesn't he say funny things?”

“He certainly does,” said Clara, smiling.

“I'll say he does!” said Henry, grinning.

“It is most unfortunate,” said Mrs. Stricker, coughing behind her hand.

“I would not go so far as to say that the boy is dangerously insane,” warned Mr. Stricker, with a wave of his hand. “But

who can tell when an insane person is or is not dangerous?"

"That's just it," said Henry.

"And to think I never suspected it," said Clara. "Poor boy! I've been blaming him, when I should have pitied him. Of course, that's it. That explains everything."

"Now, under such circumstances," continued Mr. Stricker, "it is entirely proper that we should act. It is fortunate that I made this discovery. It may save the family from disgrace. There's not only not going to be any divorce in this family—there's not going to be any runaway husbands, neither. A husband whose mind is affected and who has to be put into an asylum may be a misfortune, but we can still hold up our heads. Do you understand?"

From one to another they looked, startled into a thrilled quiet. An asylum! Charley in an asylum! Why, it was sensational!

"Would you really do that?" asked Clara.

"I think it is the only thing *to do*," said her father gravely.

"Of course it is," said Henry.

Clara made a helpless gesture with her hands.

"Poor Charley!" she exclaimed, writhing her lips to prevent the full expression of a resolute smile.

A little later Mr. Stricker went upstairs and interrupted Charley's ocarino *macabre* to offer his hand, in token of reconciliation and father-in-lawful affection. Charley accepted the hand patiently.

"Now, Charley," said Mr. Stricker, with a genial smile behind the bristles of his mustaches, "this all looks like a very sad affair. But I believe the sun already is shining. I've just had a little heart-to-heart talk with the folks downstairs. They are beginning to see your viewpoint as well as their own. Of course, you know it was all a shock. We were all shocked. But I think the whole Stricker family is

a broad-minded family, Charley. And broad-mindedness is next to patriotism, my boy. Now, none of us want to do anything in a hurry. You don't want to do anything in a hurry, I know. More hurry, more flurry. So why not all of us be reasonable? You stay on here for the next few weeks, come to work as usual, and draw your salary on Saturday. Meanwhile think it all over and make up your mind. Decide just what you want to do. Then, if you do want to leave Clara, why we'll all have to make the best of it. How about it?"

Charley spun the ocarino on his thumb.

"I shall not change my mind," he said clearly. "But I do want to decide just what I shall do. So I suppose I am agreeable to your suggestion."

"Excellent!" said Mr. Stricker cheerfully. "Spoken like an American gentleman."

But Charley was suspicious.

He was distrustful when Mr. Stricker went downstairs and had another long talk with Clara in the kitchen, with the door closed.

He regarded the unwonted cheerfulness and tenderness of Clara as unnatural.

He was mortally offended at the open friendship which was extended to him by Mrs. Stricker and her son Henry.

He knew these people too well to feel comfortable in the presence of such unreasonable phenomena.

When Charley was finally prevailed upon to return to the dining room, there was a general shaking of hands and wiping away of tears. In the meekest of moods, Clara assented to the arrangement that she and Charley were to be polite and kind to each other, without being husband and wife again.

That, Charley knew, was not the real Clara. It did not take a logician to surmise that Mr. Stricker was guiding them in some connivance for his own purpose. But the object of so

palpable a fraud eluded him. Nor did he care especially to pursue it.

His own plans, dimly apprehended, vaguely outlined, the prospect of some vast adventure, a majestic accomplishment, a splendid birth of dreams into realities, were too alluring to his meditations. It was easy to dismiss the Strickers and their schemes.

At the front door he allowed himself the fleeting pleasure of appraising them. There they stood in his vestibule, on his blue-and-white checked linoleum, uttering their individual good-nights. Their business was finished and they were going home. Old Mrs. Stricker was gaunt and grim and angular and silent. Looming beside her in the shadow was her husband, portly, bushy, brushy, red-faced, loud-voiced, important. And with them, the joint product of their union, Henry Stricker; the expression of their nuptial passions.

On the lowest of the white marble steps, glistening in the lamp light, John Stricker paused for the delivery of a parting original.

"Good-night, Charley and Clara," he said huskily. "Cheer up! The worst is yet to come. Ha! Ha! You mustn't look so down in the mouth. Jonah came up, all right, you know. Ha! Ha! Well! Good-night again, and pleasant dreams!"

Murmuring together, the three went off up the street. Charley slammed shut the door and bolted it. As he silently followed Clara through the hall and into the dining room, he was acutely aware of a blotch on the back of his wife's neck. Its inflamed eruption remained with him as an irritation, even when it was out of his actual vision.

He decided that she looked blowzy and unkempt.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

HIS DREAM GIRL

FOR the next few weeks, life went on outwardly as it had gone on before, but within Charley moved and dwelt in a spiritual storm.

There had been, both in his home and in his office, an apparent forgetting of the great quarrel. Yet Charley could not be said to have been deceived. He knew there was astir around him something ominous. He sensed this subconsciously, yet such was his mood that he was not annoyed. Whatever it might be, he felt it must be unimportant. Beneath the calm of his own external behavior there was an immense suspense which occupied him to the exclusion of pettier concerns. Charley was making up his mind. Or rather, his own heart was making him up.

He was in grave perplexity. When he began to study himself, with the practical intention of leaving Clara and attempting a new method of living, he experienced an increasing distrust of himself. He was afraid of the incoherence of his desires.

First of all, he was not sure whether he wished to draw pictures or to compose music, or to play a musical instrument. He could not bring himself to any definite course of action. His desires persisted in remaining unorganized. He could not strip them for action. All sorts of doubts intruded upon his resolve. He began to be obsessed with the assurance that his pose of superiority was without warrant

in himself; that, even if he broke his bonds and made an earnest attempt, he never would amount to anything.

He had a great desire to amount to something. And in his heart there was an insistent, prophetic counsel that he would amount to something; a promise at war with his doubt. Often he would draw pictures, hoping to create something beautiful, only to tear them up, in despair. Again he would try to hum an original melody; to fit the discordant emotions into coherent song, but always he failed. Failing to draw as he wished to draw, he thought if he could but make music of the pictures in his mind, he knew it would be good and beautiful music. Pictures! Pictures! They tormented him. Everything revealed itself unto him in pictures. Bright pictures in his eyes, picture sounds in his ears, fragrant pictures in his nostrils. If he thought of the sea, there came to his nose the clean, brackish tang of the salt air; the sting of the spindrift on his lips, and the surging break of the waves upon gray and lonely stretches of sand. By such pictures he felt braced and invigorated; he wanted to communicate that exaltation to others—but he was impotent, inarticulate, and discouraged.

Out of his impressions, he could create no single thing by which the beauty he himself experienced could be made manifest to others.

Of the teeming quarters of his brain he was no longer master. His head was overrun with a swirling and inchoate panorama of colorful images. Sometimes he felt like a pygmy lost among the giants in the land of Brobdingnag.

The swift pageant of unrelated shadows that passed before his mental vision left him startled and bewildered. A gray castle in the moonlight, its grim bastions and battlemented parapets and jutting bartizans overhung with the gauzy silver tracery of moonshine; next a swarthy brigand, swinging across his bulking shoulder a leather bandolier, stuffed with cartridges; and then a crucifer in a crowded aisle of a vast cathedral, marching slowly in the rhythm of the intoning voices of

the choir; a burnoosed Moor, his woolen cloak and hood touched with the pink splendor of the desert dawn.

How to make drawings or music of all this? Or of the odd memories which were jumbled in the ragbag of his mind, mixed inextricably with such pictures. Now a desolate heap of ancient, sepulchral stones, a cromlech of the dolmens and menhirs of the druids, upon a bleak and deserted moor, behind which loose hills of sand stretched endlessly away. Obliterating such a fancy would come the memory of Schumann-Heink, in a gown of blue and silver, under the crown of her white hair, singing "My Heart Ever Faithful," one rainy Thursday afternoon at Ford's.

Memories and phantasies would come trooping across the arena of his imagination, if he but allowed his lids to linger down over his eyes—a rabbi, in the priestly vestment of the ephod, raising his voice in prayer; Sarah Bernhardt, evoking cheers on the stage of the New Academy of Music in *L'Aiglon*; a mendicant friar, rapping his red knuckles against the green and bolted door of a monastery. Pictures! Pictures! Pictures!

Often he would reflect upon the pictures he had seen in reproduction, wishing with all his heart that he might create greater masterpieces—fragile glories in oil, spread upon ancient plaster, and many-paneled altar pieces. He longed to linger in foreign capitals and haunt the great galleries; to wander through the aisles and arches and lighted corridors of the Ufizzi, the Louvre, the Museum of Frederick the Great and the solemn Haarlem collection.

Of these places he was well informed, because he had read intently of them, and had studied such reproductions as he could find in books. He had never seen the Walters collection in his own city, because he was always at work when it was open to the public. All that Charley could look at were the Turner murals in the court house, and he admired them

rather patronizingly, knowing there were so many better things that he had never seen.

Incoherence! That was the trouble with his mind. And his soul. A constant and incoherent agitation; a great, throbbing and altogether disorganized hunger for something he could not define. Like an invading carnival mob, the phantoms flocked through the gateways of his mind, playful but unmanageable. How could a man play host to such discordant fancies?—to the city's land-locked harbor in the red blessing of a dying afternoon, with the schooners from the Eastern Shore tied to the wharves, or riding at anchor, their furled canvases kissed by the mothering sun; how could he entertain flowers that he had seen in a shop-window on Eutaw Street, roses and hyacinths, yellow poppies and a bundle of violets in silver paper—and the moment after the blue memory of a sea picture by Winslow Homer?

There was no stopping the endless pictorial cavalcade. All the vast pageantry of history might intrude and erase the other visions; a long caravan trooping down the centuries; the hordes of Chaldeans and Persians, rushing through the brazen doors of Nineveh; Philip dying; Constantine in his chariot, beholding the writing in the clouds; Queen Marie de Medici in the house of her favorite Rubens; Webster, Clay and Calhoun in stern-visaged conference; Madame Recamier in the soft-stepped coilings of her shawl dance. Color and flash and flame came down with them; Charlemagne in Lombardy, and the black invasion that over-flung the armed might of Spain; the thunderous beat of the drum, the clash of steel spears on mail breast-plates; the pæans of victory and the shouts of despair.

Especially he was attracted to certain colors. He loved particular combinations; orange-red with yellows, violet with yellow, violet with yellowish-green and violet with greenish-yellow, and scarlet and turquoise. He never tired of recall-

ing the young green, the turquoise trail, of the wake of a ship in the bay.

And out of such vagrant abstractions as these his dreams might twist into an Elizabethan maid in braids, pensively playing upon the virginals.

He had a soul definitely weird. He was possessed of dreams and fancies not only, but of spectral and beautiful impulses. The sight of certain women, arrogant in pride of beauty and position, inflamed him with wrath. His fingers then itched for a tweak of their scornful noses. And some he saw whom he wished to shame more cruelly; for whom the squeezing of a nose too far up-tilted would not suffice. These he would have ravaged brutally; and then he would have insisted that they look back into his eyes while he said to them, slowly and distinctly, "See what I have done to you. I have given you an humiliation. You drew aside your skirts when you passed a beggar woman with a brat sucking at her breast. You should not draw aside your skirt. You should have a brat sucking at your breast. Now go bathe."

Dream pictures!

Of all his experiences, they were the most poignant, the most precious; those shifting and elusive dream pictures.

Could he not organize them, harness them, do something with them? This was the question with which he taxed himself during those weeks of suspense. Constance had started him upon his journey, but she had given him no road-map. She had served him well, but not completely. However, he did not regret her. It was well they had stopped where they had. From Constance, Charley had learned to value his own future; to stop and consider; to take thought; to focus his meditations. In spite of his doubts, the deeper part of him believed more implicitly than ever in his separateness from the people he knew; in the integrity of his own destiny. There was something in him that told him he was

anointed, and while he laughed at his own egotism, he nevertheless believed.

He knew that he was different. He was a dreamer. He was an artist. The one predicated the other. In every dreamer there is the potential artist; one needs only the energy and the vehicle to make the dream visible to the rest of the world, and the miracle is accomplished. Charley had imagination, and it painted for him bright dreams. But he could not translate those dreams into an idiom which would make them intelligible and admirable to the rest of the world.

Beyond that, he was unable to go. It baffled him. Baffled in drawing he tried to make his pictures into music, but somehow the melodies would not come.

At length he began to wonder if his separation from Constance was responsible. Could she have helped him now? Sensibly enough, he concluded that she could not. He was surprised at how quickly he had cut her out of his conscience; the memories of her that remained were detached and untinctured with regrets. He knew now that he had never loved Constance; he had merely been hungry for intellectual comradeship.

Would he ever be able to love any one?

With a twisted smile he assured himself that he certainly would not. His contention that there were no women left in the world worthy of being loved was at last a conviction. Venus was dead. Dead—dead—dead!

All that was left was his dream girl.

A warm *elan* gushed through him when he returned his eyes to the contemplation of the thought image of that ideal woman, which he had fashioned for himself out of loneliness and hopeless desire.

What an altogether different creature she was from all the rest of women! There was no one like her; there could never be any one like her. In her there was something of everything beautiful. This gracious woman of his musings and his medi-

tations was all woman—intensely and absolutely feminine. There was no possibility that she could speak one false word, commit a single *gaucherie*, to weaken the sure power of her instinctive femininity.

Her body was exquisitely rounded, inclined toward slenderness, but with full enticing breasts. A face langourously sweet, yet vitally alive. Hair of sunset red. She had a cleavingly sharp wit; real brains. She could talk with a fellow and understand what he talked about.

And then he would smile at himself. Some girl, he would reflect. Too good to be true. But not for long could he mock at his fancy. He reverenced it too deeply for laughter. To him her face was as music, a symphony of sympathetic expression. He would imagine himself with her, under a scimitar moon in an orange grove, their murmurs unheard against the warbling of a nightingale. She was like an *ouphe* out of a garden, as he tenderly regarded her there; or again, as she danced away from him beguilingly, a pink-heeled mænad, romping under the stars, dancing him to seduction.

Could she ever come true?

What of it, then?

Was she not better than an illicit liaison with an interior decorator from Massachusetts, who used a lipstick?

Aye, better! For her voice was softer, sweeter, than the dulcimer, and her eyes bluer than the feathers of a peacock, and her lips redder than the flower of the clinging myrtle, and her breath sweeter than the honeysuckle, and her freshness brighter than the morning glory.

Aye, better, far, far better!

But he was afraid that even the girl he fashioned in his dreams might not endure; he feared she would lose her way in the tangled maze of the dream-killing city; the web of newly paved and widened streets, where he lived and loved her. Slowly, even stupidly, he had come to understand that no

vendor of dreams was licensed to cadge his fancies in those modern highways.

The city appalled him. Bah! It was a destroyer of dreams. Old Johns Hopkins! He had dreamed a dream. Now the city had made it into a red-brick reality of a hospital, with a carved figure of Christ sentinel at its portal, but a hospital for the rich and not for the poor. The dream had been a poor man's hospital. The reality was a rich man's hospital.

The City of the Paint and Powder Club; the Monumental City, with marbles and bronzes to nobodies and neglected graves for the dreamers; the city of unending processions and parades, of special celebrations, Old Home Weeks, of decorations and illuminations, of conventions of Elks and Eagles and Moose, and whatnots among the human animals.

Sometimes Charlie would stop and consider whether there was, within the boundaries of the town, one enlightened intellect. And he would remind himself that Dunken lived on Hollins Street. Dunken! He spat out the name valiantly. It was distasteful. Dunken gloried in the despoilation of sentiment and dream. Dunken's heel was on the rose, and he flatulently denied that roses were beautiful or sweet smelling. Dunken had facts; he had figures; he had tabulations and statistics. He could juggle hard words expertly, unusual words and funny words; he made educated people gasp in admiration, and uneducated people reel with bewildered insult; he owned a magazine and in it he made a pose and a strut of disagreeing with all accepted things. Dunken could not create one beautiful image. Dunken had knowledge but no wisdom. Dunken got and got and got, but with all his getting, he had not got understanding.

No! Not Dunken! Dunken was the true flower of the city's thought; its proudest intellectual blossom, ornate of leaf, gorgeous of tint, admirable to gaze upon but without fragrance or loveliness, and prickly to the touch.

What was he to do with his kaleidoscopic mind?

Voices were telling him, in tones urgent and low, of a coming miracle. In dreams, night and day, he heard them. They whispered that the will and the wish would surely be accomplished. They spoke softly of a day to be when he should make manifest his dreams. To these voices he listened in reverent attention. He took them seriously. They were the only things left in life that he did take seriously. He believed in them. He believed that every prophet and every seer, Joseph and Daniel and Jesus, and the peasant girl in the fields of Domremy, had heard them. To Charley came the sure, unwavering vision; the promise, not of the world's love, or its applause, but of something worthy brought out of himself, admirable for mankind, and fit to endure.

He decided to dally a bit longer. He was content to wait upon the promise of inner voices.

In his heart he would maintain a crypt, where the faith of such mystical fancies should not languish unto death.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

CLOTHES AND SEX AND GOD ALMIGHTY

DURING the weeks that followed the quarrel at Charley's house, Mr. John Stricker, the president of the Atlass Brush Company, was a very busy man.

First he had consulted a lawyer. In the barrister's dingy little office, near the Law Building, and almost within the cool shadow of the courthouse, he confided his problem. With his head thrust forward, and one finger on his right cheek bone, the lawyer had listened professionally. Afterward, he outlined to Mr. Stricker just the appropriate procedure. Forthwith went Mr. Stricker to consult three members of the medical profession, recommended by the lawyer.

The three physicians had shaken their heads severally, upon hearing the evidence which Mr. Stricker adduced.

Mr. Stricker considered their fees outrageous, but once he started upon an enterprise he was not the man to fall back. He paid Dr. Samuel B. Lorny, Dr. Holton Q. Wardleston and Dr. George Georgian, Third, the fees which they demanded.

Whereupon Doctor Lorny, Doctor Wardleston and Doctor Georgian agreed to visit the home of Mr. and Mrs. Charley Turner, under the guise of casual acquaintances of Mr. Stricker, and there to observe whatever happened to be there to observe.

The growing realization in Charley that it was his destiny to bring forth beauty, and that he could adopt no medium by which beauty might be brought forth, worked in his soul as a ferment and an anguish.

He became oppressed with the futility of his dreams; he ultimately became distrustful of his prompting voices; he was sensible of the ineffectuality of everything.

He was sure that he should do something practical, draw, or compose, or play, but he could not make up his mind what to do.

Was he, then, altogether hopeless? Would all his dreams eventually overcome him? Was his life to be nothing but a stagnant pool, incapable of reflecting the light of even one distant star? At the suspicion, his cheeks blanched. He must not bury his dreams in a napkin. Upon him was laid a responsibility, the duty of making manifest unto others the beauty he himself experienced. That was the obligation of the artist.

Again he turned to his mental pictures, his inchoate dream visions, wondering now how he should go about picking the prettiest from among them and displaying them to his fellows. It was a ridiculous dilemma. If he but knew some process of transmutation by which he could divert them into harmonies of lines or sounds. He wanted to be a painter or a musician, yet secretly he shrank from reducing sky and sea to messy pigments, or the elusive glory of sweet tones in concord to thin black lines and idiotic cryptograms. Why was that, he wondered. Or did he shrink because his dreams were so inharmonious, garbled and jumbled and mixed up? At the very moment he put the question to himself, conflicting, unrelated fancies were flitting through the rafters of his brain. One moment he was contemplating a sky, haunted with the circling swoop of a red-tailed buzzard. Below were hummocks and dunes of yellow sand. That vanished. In its place he saw the lambent undulation of a torch of blue and red flames, carried down an aisle of gossiping trees by *trouvere* and *troubadour*, making their way by command to the palace of a mediæval duke.

Here was neither pattern nor design, law nor order, purpose

nor intent. A scarf of yellow brocade, and then a wide sweep of restless, slate-gray sea. Incoherence! What did a man do when he was incoherent? How was he to put to use a tangled profusion of color and shape and movement?

Reveries clung to him like broken strands of cobweb; he was haunted by beautiful and terrible chimeras. And all the while he was possessed of the hot *verve* that begged for some release of his fanciful passions. In him was the warm fever to do and do and do. And he did not know what to do.

He began to fear that he was losing his mind.

Against this he had only that legendary faith for his comfort; the faith and hope that had been with him from the beginning; the expectation that something would happen, that he would find himself.

The conflict was long-drawn out and indecisive. There was always the fear that he might be playing with impractical nonsense. If he were to put any faith in himself, shouldn't he be a practical fellow and harness his hopes? Until now, he had never known what he wanted from life; he had only known a profound dissatisfaction with life as he had lived it. Now life could be different. He could pull up stakes and do as he wished. Why not go at the thing in a practical way? Why not take a leaf out of Mr. Stricker's notebook? Perhaps he could study art at the Maryland Institute, or music at the Peabody Conservatory. That was the way, no doubt. He could begin at the beginning.

Money? Of course, he would have to have money. He would have to support Clara. And he would have to support himself and pay for the course as well.

Well, he could get the money. If he really wanted anything, he would find out how to get it. If only he were sure—

He would scourge his soul with brushes, if need be; he would work like a fiend in hell, if it were worth it; if his heart had to be curried with steel brushes, he could go the

limit truly and well; he could become a strictly Stricker workman, and the price would not be too high.

If he could be sure—

He could not be sure. Not altogether sure. If what Mr. Stricker said were true—if all a man needed were to wake up, perhaps the old man was right. Perhaps Charley ought to wake up. He might wake up and show them all what would become of his dreams.

He closed his eyes, ready to be thrilled at the prospect of such a sacrifice. But the thrill failed to reach him.

Instead he seemed to hear the voices more loudly and filled with grave anxiety, warning him to beware. If the voices were the tongues of his own soul, they were troubled now in his behalf.

He must not follow John Stricker's way. He must wait until he had found his own way. There was no mistaking the voices. They warned him, as Constance had warned him, to be strong and to be himself.

The insurgent call of his blood, the gush of rebellion in his veins, joyously answered the challenge.

No!

He would not go John Stricker's road. He would wait until he had found his own road.

Somehow the way would be made clear to him. He had the faith of the mystic, the egotist, and the fool.

There came another Friday night, and Charley was once more barefoot and collarless in his upper room, devoutly playing his ocarino. In the front parlor sat Clara, entertaining four men—her father, Doctor Lorny, Doctor Wardleston and Doctor Georgian.

In low tones they had all conversed for about half an hour. Finally, Mr. Stricker rose and said portentously:

"I'll go upstairs and get him for you."

Clara gazed after her father in apprehensive silence, as he

mounted the stairs and tramped in upon Charley's ocarino sonata.

"Charley," said Mr. Stricker with a friendly smile, and a reassuring tug at one of his walrus mustaches, "it isn't often I ask you to do a favor for me, now, is it?"

Charley grinned like a Chinese joss.

"Now I am asking a favor of you this time," conceded Mr. Stricker. "There are three men downstairs."

"Yes?" said Charley, with his head cocked to one side.

"I want you to meet them," cajoled Mr. Stricker. "It may be, you'll be doing yourself a favor as well as me. But I know you'll be doing me one, that's certain. And bread cast upon the waters, you know, Charley."

"Why should I meet them?" asked Charley.

"Well, now, look here, Charley," explained Mr. Stricker. "I've been thinking a lot about you. You don't like the brush business. But you might like it some day. If this turns out well, I know you'll like it. These men are thinking of investing money in my business. They want to go into the export field with Strickly Stricker brushes. You know everything is export now, these days. And why not brushes? And if they do——"

"And if they do?" repeated Charley tonelessly.

"I'll need to send somebody all over the world. And I've suggested you. And these gentlemen—well, they just want to get a look at you, that's all. Ha! Ha!"

Charley juggled his ocarino reflectively.

"Something tells me you're lying," he said judiciously. "Are you?"

"Why, now, Charley!" protested Mr. Stricker virtuously. "That's not a nice thing to say to me. I'm offering you a chance to get in on the ground floor."

"Many a man has gone in on the ground floor and found that the elevator wasn't running," shouted Charley. "Is that an original, pop? Yes, son, that is an original. Gee, pop!"

Mr. Stricker glared at him in furious indignation.

"Are you going to refuse a little favor like that?" he asked.

"No!" said Charley. "I'll come down and be looked over for you, just as soon as I make myself presentable."

The looking over interview was a disaster.

That is to say, it would have been a disaster so far as Charley's hopes of being sent abroad as a brush salesman were concerned. In so far as the purpose of Mr. Stricker could be served, it was a magnificent exhibition.

As soon as Charley had shaken hands with the three visitors, he was offended. They were too typical of the race of the commonplace not to outrage him. The names by which they were presented—Mr. Smedley, Mr. Brown and Mr. Hawkins—were annoying to his sensibilities. He did not like their benevolent attitude; their glances one to another, and the confident shaking of their heads at inappropriate moments.

He decided that the only way to escape a most boresome hour was to shock them and get what amusement he could out of their tumult.

They were talking of inanities, and noting his comments upon these inanities with a most disconcerting attention. When the conversation reached the point of the current styles in women's dresses, Charley began.

"I think clothes are immoral and disgusting," he said quietly.

"You think what?" shouted Mr. Stricker, at first appalled, and then gratified, as he cast a meaning look toward the three visitors. "Charley! You're some joker, I'll say. Ha! Ha! That's a good one!"

"But I don't intend it as a joke," protested Charlie, unpertrubed. "I am serious. Except for the purposes of climate, we should not wear clothes at all. By and by we would grow enough hair not to worry about the climate anyhow."

"Charley, please shut up!" said Clara.

"Of course"—began Mr. Stricker, but Doctor Lorny interrupted.

"Why do you think clothes immoral and disgusting?" he asked, chirping his words like a dozing parrot.

"I think they are a mortal sin," declared Charley.

"A sin? It's not a sin to wear clothes," said Clara.

"The image of God is a sacred thing," insisted Charley. "Clothes conceal a sacred thing. It is a sin to conceal a sacred thing. It is immoral to do so."

"That is sacrilegious, Charley," said Mr. Stricker in the tone of a man who thinks that even a lunatic can go too far.

"No! It is highly religious," insisted Charley blandly. "The fact is that man has grown to be ashamed of the image of God. I think it is a sin to be ashamed of the image of God. I think we should be very proud to be created in the image of God and display the whole image on every conceivable occasion—a sort of permanent heavenly exhibit, you see."

"All of it?" gasped Mr. Stricker.

"All!" said Charley solemnly.

The three physicians glanced at one another, and one of them scribbled a note on a pad which he had concealed under the hat on his lap.

"We all have dirty thoughts about the image of God, gentlemen," continued Charley languidly. "At least, most of us do. Imagine having dirty thoughts about the image of God, gentlemen!"

"I think we ought to change the conversation, or *I* shall leave the room," said Clara.

"Oh, this is just some of Charley's foolishness," said Mr. Stricker, with a solemn wink of the eye that was away from Charlie.

"Don't you believe in foolishness?" asked Charley.

"A little nonsense now and then is relished by the best of men," said Mr. Stricker stoutly.

"But don't you believe that folly begets wisdom?" persisted Charley.

There was a puzzled silence.

"Suppose there were no fools in the world? What would be the use of wisdom? It would lose caste. There would be no one to show off to. You would have no one before whom wisdom could be paraded. Then people would cast it aside, and everybody would be foolish and everybody would be happy."

"Oh, Charley, don't be such a fool," said Clara.

"Ahem!" said Doctor Wardleston. "That is all very interesting, of course, Mr. Turner. Very interesting, of course. But wisdom means progress. It was wisdom that gave us all that makes us civilized. Not until man got wisdom did he discover marriage, for example."

Charley grinned at him in unholy delight.

"I disagree with you," he said. "I think marriage is a savage state, and married people are barbarians."

"Go on! Do go on!" purred Doctor Georgian, who was scribbling furiously under his hat.

"It is just a foolish superstition," continued Charley obligingly. "A vast barracoon, crammed with slaves, who, oddly enough, hug and kiss the iron bars which contain them. Marriage is a behemoth."

"A what?" asked Doctor Georgian, pausing in his scribbling.

"A behemoth—the colossal old beast of the sea, rising out of the muddy ocean of tradition to claim its meal of human hearts. Don't you understand, sirs? Marriage inevitably implies woman. And woman is a terrible invention. There is nothing more terrible. What is worse than a talkative woman? A silent one, of course. And that, Mr. Stricker," he added gently, "is an original."

"It's not very good," was Mr. Stricker's comment. "Frankness compels me to say it is not very good. There is no point to the remark at all. For a woman is either silent or talkative, ain't she?"

"Let's not talk about marriage," said Mr. Stricker, after noting that no one replied to his criticism. "Let us talk of purpose in life. That, to me, is important. A man without a purpose is like a ship without a rudder. What is success in life and how is it to be achieved? Now my idea about that——"

"Yes," said Charlie. "That is an excellent idea. But I think it lacks something. There must be something sexual in a man's work before he can succeed."

"Sexual!" gasped Mr. Stricker.

"Sexual!" chirped Doctor Wardleston.

"Sexual!" grunted Doctor Lorny.

"Sexual!" scribbled Doctor Georgian, under the hat.

Clara arose, with offended dignity, and departed from the room.

"My goodness, Charley!" pleaded Mr. Stricker in despair. "You have made it necessary for Clara to go out of this room. What is the matter with you, anyway?"

"I am afraid you are misunderstanding me, as usual," complained Charley cheerfully. "Let me show you what I mean. I look at life differently from you gentlemen. You pretend to understand it. I'm terribly puzzled about it, and most of the time I am amused. You see? I don't understand anything or anybody, really. Do you understand what I mean?"

"We understand," said Doctor Lorny, soothingly, and he looked to his brethren for confirmation. They nodded.

"Then I shall have to explain," said Charley. "Life as you gentlemen live it is a shadow from which I instinctively recoil. I don't know why, but I do. . . . I love dreams. You hate them. No! I am sure that you hate dreams."

"I like nice dreams," interrupted Mr. Stricker. "But I hate nightmares. Cabbage always gives me nightmares."

He looked mortally offended at the wicked smile which Charley bestowed upon him.

"I mean to say," he went on quietly, "that we look upon life from different viewpoints. But I believe, somehow, that the love a man bestows on his work is somehow like the love he bestows on his wife."

The four of them stared at him solemnly.

"I mean it actually and physically," said Charlie. "It's a queer thing, but I never thought of it before. You gentlemen have stimulated me. I am getting enthusiastic over a discovery. I mean what I say actually, physically, sexually. It is a tremendous idea, gentlemen. I must tell you about it."

"Yes! Please do!" gasped Doctor Lorny.

"Isn't it true that the pleasure of a sex experience is exactly comparable to the pleasure an artist experiences when he paints a picture or writes a song?"

"I never heard of an artist writing a song," growled Mr. Stricker.

"It is the spiritual transmutation of sex, I am sure," argued Charley. He was beginning to forget his auditors; he was talking out loud to himself and enjoying it. "We all conceive in ecstasy and bring forth in agony. Can't you see that? Sex, gentlemen, is at the root of everything in life—in the brush business as in everything else. A sculptor loves his clay as sexually as he loves his mistress."

"Whew!" exclaimed Doctor Wardleston.

"Too bad," muttered Mr. Stricker, with a glance at his visitors which said, in deepest melancholy. "Didn't I tell you before you ever came up here? Now didn't I?"

Nothing could stop Charley now. He was following out an idea that promised, vaguely, to throw some light on his own

problem. He went on, speaking brightly to them, but forgetting their presence in his enthusiasm.

"Love is something more than the yearning of one human being for another," he argued. "Love is an energy. It is a tireless energy, always creative; an energy that in an engineer can transform a desert into a garden; can rear monuments, write epics, and paint masterpieces. Love is a creative energy; *the only* creative. Why, it's as plain as the wart on Mr. Stricker's nose there. The trouble with all the failures in the world is that they do not know how to love. A man may love his wife and go into bankruptcy, but no man who truly loves his work ever fails. It is not enough to love wife, children, home, mother, country and the Lord God Almighty. The secret of success is the secret of loving your work. Possessed of a love like that—a sexual love for his work, I tell you—a man will find in his mind and in his body a flaming energy which no task can daunt, no obstacle out-face, no disaster obliterate. We have thought of love too long as a thing of man and woman and their child. It is nothing of the kind. It is God Himself in His richest garments."

"Charley!" roared Mr. Stricker. "Please!"

But Charley was too pleased with his own eloquence to be halted by Mr. Stricker.

"God is love and love is God," he cried. "You all say you believe that. We recognize Him in the soft pressure of a woman's hand, or the dear grace of a baby's smile, but we overlook Him in the papers on our desks, in the whirr of the loom, the crash on the anvil and the roar of the factory wheels. For men who love that kind of work, that is love. Love is everywhere—in the pen and ink of the poet and the pigments of the painter. It is there, if we will look for it, and listen with a ready reverence. Why do you stare at me, when I tell you the truth? God is a deity of love, gentlemen, to be worshiped not alone in the nuptial chamber—ha! ha! I thought that would make you jump—but as well in the market

place and the playground. Wherever men move and act and plan, love must be present; the high, glad love of the divine majesty that is inherent in the task itself. Men who achieve in the arts, in the professions, even in the trades, even in the brush business, love the thing they do with a fierce, hot, embracing passion. Nothing can keep them away from that thing. They love it, and success comes to them in the same measure in which they serve the thing they love."

He paused and took a deep breath. Surprise filled him, for he had enjoyed his utterance. He had forgotten to pose, in the earnest speaking of a new thought he had found. He guessed that it was an old thought, too, but he was proud that he himself had found it.

The three gentlemen rose simultaneously, and Doctor Georgian put his paper in his pocket.

"We must be going now," said Doctor Lorny seriously. "We have been glad to meet you, Mr. Turner."

Charley laughed.

"I'm sure of that," he said. "Good night!"

On the street corner, before he parted from his three hired physicians, John Stricker paused to hear their opinion.

"Absolutely no doubt of it," said Doctor Lorny.

"I am afraid he is incurable," said Doctor Wardleston. "At least we are justified in holding him for observation."

"I shall write an account of the case, from my notes," said Doctor Georgian.

"Thank you, gentlemen," said Mr. Stricker. "Good night!"

They went their several ways, under the golden cusp of a riding moon, cradled in a chariot of cloud.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

FOUR WISE MAD MEN

ON Monday of the following week Charley was called into the private office of Mr. Stricker.

"Charley," said Mr. Stricker, "I have a letter of the greatest importance to my business, to be delivered. It involves a loan which I need. How would you like to play messenger boy for me and deliver it to a man out in Pikesville? It will give you a nice, long, free car ride, and you will practically have the afternoon off from the brush business. You needn't come back."

"Give me the letter," said Charley.

An hour and a half later he walked up the gravel path that led to a large, rambling, old-fashioned cottage with drawn blinds. He rang the doorbell, and was surprised at the quickness with which the door was opened.

A stout, red-faced man, with a two days' growth of beard on his chin and cheeks, thrust out his head and said:

"Are you from Mr. Stricker?"

Charley nodded, and the man stood aside. As Charley entered, the door was slammed shut and bolted, while Charley stood, staring at four familiar faces. Three were the visitors he had entertained a few nights before in his home. The fourth was Mr. Stricker himself.

"Ha! Ha!" laughed Mr. Stricker nervously. "Beat you out here. Good joke, Charley. I came in a taxi."

"What for?" asked Charley.

There was a moment of uneasy silence. Finally, Mr. Stricker cleared his throat and said:

"Charley, you might as well know the worst at once. You don't know it, but you're sick. You talk funny. Nobody else talks the way you do, or says the kind of things you say. You're always talking about dreams. Now do you know what these gentlemen here are? They're mind specialists. They examined you the other night. And you know what they say? They say you're suffering from delusions of grandeur. You're always talking about the great things you're going to do in the world. You're going to be so much greater than all the rest of your family. That's insanity, and this is an insane asylum, and you've been legally committed here for care and observation.

"And we shall see," concluded Mr. Stricker, unconsciously paraphrasing an ancient scripture, "and we shall see what will become of your dreams."

Charley blinked at his father-in-law. For the first time in a long while, he was jolted out of his favorite pose of debonair self-possession.

"You have committed me to an insane asylum?" he cried hoarsely.

"To a private sanitarium. A very nice one," replied Mr. Stricker throatily.

Charley shook his head abruptly; his mouth settled into a straight line; his face was white.

"This," he said crisply, "has all the aspects of a strictly Stricker original!"

"Now, Charley," protested Mr. Stricker, with self-evident patience, "I know you're going to think hard of me—I know you're going to think hard of us all—but we're all of us, every one, agreed that this was the thing to do. Even your own mother agreed. And we none of us want you to think hard of us, Charley; not one!"

"That's generous!"

"And besides, it may be for only a little while. You may not be here any time at all. You needn't feel bad about it. Just a little rest, that's all. The best medical brains of this city are agreed that you need a little mental rest, and that's all there is to it, Charley. That's all there is to it in this world, and we've acted all along in a strictly Christian spirit!"

"Poor Jesus!" exclaimed Charley. "What a lot of rotten things He gets blamed for!"

A shudder ran through the red-faced man, and through John Stricker, and through the three hired physicians. Their glances met in self-righteous confirmation. Was any further proof needed that a man such as this needed to be restrained?

"Charley, this is Mr. Jaeger," said Mr. Stricker briskly, as he waved his hand toward the red-faced man. "Mr. Jaeger is the general superintendent of this place. These other gentlemen are all doctors connected with this institution. I know that you and Mr. Jaeger are going to be great friends!"

Mr. Jaeger put his head on one side and then nodded it reassuringly. Charley stared at him and shook his head.

"No," he said. "You're mistaken. Mr. Jaeger and I won't like each other, unless he is willing to keep himself shaved. In the meantime, I would a parting word with thee, friend father-in-law. You have played a typical strictly Stricker jest upon your confiding son-in-law. You know that I am not insane. You know that you are a damned liar and a thief, and a hypocrite in the bargain. I don't have to tell you. But there is more that you should be told. I can get out of here. You have done a high-handed proceeding in bringing me here. A writ of *habeas corpus* could be secured, and I could demonstrate my sanity. That is what I should undoubtedly do. But a thought has just occurred to me. I don't know that I shall act hastily. It depends on the kind of establishment our unshaven Jaeger runs. Perhaps it may be

an ideal place to begin living away from your daughter, God bless her. At all events, friend father-in-law, good-day to you—we will meet again, elsewhere—mayhap on the gallows—who knows?"

Charley was at last able to smile pleasantly as he made a courtly bow. Mr. Stricker and the three hired physicians looked at each other again, and shook hands silently with Jaeger, whereupon they departed, leaving Charley alone with his jailor.

The hour was then about five in the afternoon.

"Mr. Jaeger," said Charley, immediately after the door was shut, "may I ask you a question?"

"What is it?" barked Jaeger.

"Do I have to see much of you while I stay here?"

"Not if I see you first," growled Jaeger.

"You'll pardon me, won't you, then, if I ask that you take me somewhere where I belong, and where I won't have to look at your bristles? They make me think of brushes!"

"Aw, shut up," said Jaeger. "All you nuts talk alike. It's a good thing I know you're crazy, or I'd knock your block off!"

"Don't you ever knock off the blocks of crazy people?" asked Charley innocently.

"Not when they're as crazy as you are," answered Jaeger in a muttering grumble.

"You win!" said Charley. "By God, you may need a shave, but just the same——"

"C'mon!" shouted Jaeger. "You're one of them talkative nuts, I see. Talkative nuts is the worst kind of nuts there is!"

There was no further conversation. Mr. Jaeger conducted Charley up a broad staircase to a hall bedroom in the rear. It was on the south side of the second floor, and overlooked a pleasant enough yard through its one barred window. In

the room there were an iron bed, enameled in cracked white, an upholstered easy chair of great age and decrepitude, a bureau, and an old-fashioned wash-stand, on which stood a large china bowl with green and purple flowers painted on it, an earthen pitcher, filled with water, and a soap dish.

"Here's your room," said Jaeger, with menacing briefness. "Supper is served at six-thirty downstairs. Until then you can do anything you want to do!"

"Anything?" asked Charley doubtfully.

"Anything!" reiterated Jaeger impatiently.

"You don't mean I can do *anything*?" persisted Charley.

"I do mean it, I tell you!" roared Jaeger. "It's a part of the treatment for nuts to let 'em do what they likes, as long as they don't run a pen-knife through their neck, or else something that would hurt 'em!"

"And what about after supper?"

"Just the same. Do anything!"

"Well," said Charley, with a boyish grin, "if that is the kind of insane asylum this is, maybe it isn't so bad. You know, Jaeger, you can't do anything you want outside of an asylum."

"Yes, I know that, too! Only nuts can do what they like. Sensible people ain't allowed to," growled Jaeger, as if he were defending a sacred institution. "You're a nut. It don't matter what you do."

"Jaeger," said Charley, "if you were shaved, I'll be damned if I wouldn't kiss you!"

In the upholstered chair, Charley sat quietly, attempting to establish a mental calm. He expected the attempt to ~~be~~ useless. If he couldn't be calm outside of a madhouse, how could he expect to be calm inside one?

He was tingling with excitement. All his gay poise was mostly pose, and it could not withstand such a shock as this. Yet, even in his excitement, he did not find his emotions

displeasurable. He was thrilled, and he always could find a compensation in a thrill.

The situation was perfectly clear. He supposed he had been unjust to Mr. Stricker. Perhaps the old man actually believed him a bit touched. Certainly Clara believed it. And no doubt his mother, as well. That last quarrel with Clara had confirmed their suspicions. If he had tried to stop Clara from taking poison, things would have been different. It was after that the three visitors were brought to the house.

Of course! Charley smiled ruefully. He couldn't be shrewd, ever. Too busy dreaming to be cunning and discerning. Another man might have known what to expect. Charley smiled at his own stupidity. He could imagine what the secret conventicle of his relatives must have been like. Mr. Stricker had said his own mother had concurred. It was likely. They could talk the old lady into almost anything, especially if they put it on a religious basis. There they all were, envisioned in his imagination. Somewhere in the weeks just past, they had come together, convoked to do something about poor Charley, whose mind wasn't what it ought to be. Try as he would, Charley could not reflect upon it bitterly. Delusions of grandeur, the old man had said. Well, perhaps they were delusions. Certainly they were of grandeur. And whether they were or they weren't, they were disturbing to the smug vanity of people who knew their place in life and didn't try to get out of it. These dreams of high service, noble opportunities bravely met, outraged his family. Charley must be mad. Charley could understand that attitude. He could even smile at it. What if they had, coldly and without compunction, pilfered his liberty, in the manner of petty sneak thieves? What if they were insincere? Even if there was malice, and flouted vanity, in their conspirings and their complottings, what of it?

They were a product of a place, a time and condition. If

they had been, in spirit, other than that they had now shown themselves to be, there would have been less torment in Charley's heart all these years; there would have been less occasion for such torment; his violent outbursts against the tyranny of the commonplace might never have been called up.

As he mused upon these things, determining, meanwhile, to make up his mind slowly as to his future course of action, there came a rap at his door.

A man in overalls, smelling of the earth, evidently a gardener, stood on the threshold with an envelope in one hand, while he scratched the tip of his nose with the other.

"Letter for Mr. Turner," he said, curtseying, without at all interrupting the scratching of his nose.

Charley took the letter; noted that it was sealed, and that it was addressed to "Mr. Charles Turner" in a neatly turned script.

"Who are you?" asked Charley. "And please don't scratch your nose. You may get blood poisoning!"

"My name is Piggles," replied the fellow pleasantly enough. "I'm the man of all work in this bug-house. And it's my own nose!"

"Piggles?" repeated Charley, shocked at such a name.

"Yes, sir! Piggles," returned the man of all work, in a tone closed to argument.

"I wanted to be sure," Charley explained. "Well, Piggles, I am glad to know that your name is Piggles. I would never have believed it, if you, yourself, had not admitted it."

"There's an answer required," hinted Piggles.

Charley removed the letter, and carrying it to the open window, leaned against the iron bars as he read:—

"Dear Mr. Turner:

This is a letter of welcome. It is also a letter of explanation as to certain conditions which prevail among the inmates of this institution.

There are two classes of inmates. One is the mob. The other is the *intelligentsia*. The mob is—the mob. And the intelligentsia is—the intelligentsia.

Need we say more than that?

For your own sake, we hope that we need not. For, most assuredly, we shall not.

If it is your wish, you can identify yourself with the mob. In that case, ignore this letter, or write us, politely, or boorishly, as you may wish. In either case, we shall henceforth ignore you. The mob will welcome you. You can sit at their table, and have no cares.

On the other hand, if you wish to sit at our board, if you would enter the charmed circle, you will have to prove your fitness. You will have to undergo an examination at our hands.

The four of us, who compose the intelligentsia, welcome additions to our number. We await you in the library. If you come down with Piggles, we may pass you into our circle before dinner.

In either case, salutations and welcome!

(Signed) Ephraim Tuttle Tanneyday, M.D.
Harold Blessings, One by One.
Alonzo Leverton.
D. D. D.

P. S. If you think you are Napoleon, or that you have discovered perpetual motion, please disregard this invitation.

P. P. S. If, however, you *are* Napoleon, or you *have* discovered perpetual motion, then by all means come down!"

Charley went down.

The library, in which the examination was conducted, was a room on the first floor; a chamber of built-in bookshelves, made of ancient lumber, with gaping holes in the rows of books, as if the shelves were so ancient they were shedding their teeth; with a long table, and pleasant lamps, and easy chairs, and an air of comfortable enlightenment.

On the advice of Piggles, Charley knocked gently on the door. It was opened promptly, and Charley stepped into the room. Four men were gathered stiffly together, in the center of the floor, regarding him critically. Then one stepped forward, bowed pleasantly, and said:—

“I am the chairman. I am Doctor Tanneyday—M.D.”

He was a short man, all curves and rounded outlines, agreeably fed, by the looks of him. His white hair was thick, and bobbed after the fashion of male Russian dancers. Drooping from his thick, good-humored face were thick, white mustaches, which had an air of insistent depreciation of his occasional lapses from dignity.

As Charley bowed in silent acknowledgment, Doctor Tanneyday continued:—

“I want you to meet the other gentlemen who, with myself, compose our little circle. This is Mr. Blessings, One by One!”

Charley shook the cold, moist hand of a thin little man, with a bald head and thoroughly restless hands.

“Why,” said Charley, “do you add ‘One by One’ after your name? It may sound rude to ask, but——”

“Quite right,” said Mr. Blessings, One by One, with a melancholy smile. “It is one of my fanciful little idiosyncrasies. You see, when I was a little boy I went to Sunday school, as all good little boys must do in this town. And there we used to sing a hymn called ‘Count Your Blessings, Name Them One by One.’ And my name was Blessings. So the other little Sunday school boys called me Blessings, One by One. It hurt my feelings at the time. Then I forgot about it. But one morning, after I was a successful business man, and the father of seven children, I woke up certain that my name *was* Blessings, ‘One by One.’ And here I am. I can talk reasonably on every other subject except my name!”

All this while, Doctor Tanneyday had been standing alternately on one foot and then the other, impatient at the

melancholy recital. Now he seized Charley by the arm and led him away from the unhappy Mr. Blessings, One by One.

"This next old party," said the doctor, suddenly jovial, "is Mr. Alonzo Leverton; known among our circle as the man with a thousand faces!"

"How many?" exclaimed Charley, aghast.

"A thousand!" replied Doctor Tanneyday emphatically.

"Is the one I am looking at one of the thousand?" asked Charley.

"Exactly!"

"Then, how do you do, Mr. Leverton?" Charley was shaking hands. "I do hope I shall recognize you when I see you again!"

"I have a thousand faces because——" began Mr. Leverton, but Doctor Tanneyday interposed.

"Later," he remonstrated. "We must get on, dear Leverton. We really must get on, if you know—if we hope to get on at all, you know!"

From Mr. Alonzo Leverton of the thousand faces Charley was next led to a tall and silent and handsome man. His cast of features was of a charm and beauty instantly apparent; his eyes were brown and serious and almost womanly. There was a sympathy in them which no one could miss.

When he next spoke, Doctor Tanneyday unconsciously lowered his voice:

"And this is—D. D. D."

The man, thus mysteriously initialed, inclined his head with a courteous dignity, and without smiling.

"I trust our *grotesquerie* will not offend Mr. Turner," he said. His voice was musical and kind.

"Not so," protested Charley. "I find myself wondering what is coming next."

"Gentlemen, be seated!" proclaimed Doctor Tanneyday, somewhat pompously reasserting his chairmanship. When

all had taken places, the doctor leaned back comfortably and beamed upon Charley.

"We are all very friendly to you, Mr. Turner," he said. "But that must not mislead you. We must be critical in our examination. We are the intelligentsia in this sanitarium. Perhaps you consider us arrogant. You are entitled to consider us arrogant. You may as well know now as later that in this place you are entitled to *any* opinions that appeal to you, including that one. This is a free place. It is the only free place I ever heard of. Not one of us cares to leave. Escape would be comparatively easy. But why escape? Why escape from the absolute freedom of an intellectual paradise into the shackles of the world outside? This place is freer than an Athenian academy in the fifth century before Jesus. Only those worthy of such freedom are admitted into our circle. That is why we must examine you."

"I quite understand," Charley assured them, feeling himself reassured. "But before we go any further there is one thing I would like you to understand. I am *not* crazy!"

A little murmur escaped them. They looked at each other. All, save D. D. D., smiled most amiably. Alonzo Leverton made a grimace, which Charley judged to be one of his repertoire of a thousand faces.

"Ah!" said Doctor Tanneyday, rubbing his hands and nodding his head.

"I was misunderstood by my wife and her relatives, and they tricked me in here," added Charley earnestly.

"Ah! Ah!" three of them exclaimed in chorus. All rubbed their hands and nodded their heads and smiled. D. D. D. gazed intently at the ceiling.

"They expected me to be angry, but I find myself amused, and now, a bit hopeful," concluded Charley, feeling embarrassed. "I am not a lunatic. Perhaps—perhaps they are the lunatics!"

Even D. D. D. joined in the handclapping that followed this remark.

"My dear Turner," said Doctor Tanneyday, "you have the truth in your mouth with those words. Really you have. None of us here is a lunatic. The lunatics are outside. Of course, a few will creep in—the mob, you know. But not into this circle. We are all sane here, according to our private definitions of sanity. And after all, you know as well as I do that sanity or insanity may hinge upon varying standards of common sense—*nicht war?*"

The others nodded brightly in agreement, seeming rather proud of their chairman.

"We spend our time here in philosophic disputation," continued Doctor Tanneyday, playing lovingly with his white mustaches. "If we may, we go into the soul of things. Ours is a mental and spiritual communion. You may well come to bless your wife and her relatives for tricking you, by the usual methods of medical connivance, into our company—if you do get into our company, Mr. Turner. In any case, I would advise you not to brood over the injustice. Was it not Herodotus who long ago asked, 'Did justice ever deter any one from taking by force whatever he could?'"

"No! It was not!" crowed Mr. Blessings, One by One, triumphantly. "It was Thucydides!"

Doctor Tanneyday was red and abashed. To cover his confusion, he rose hastily and produced a box of cigars, which he first offered to Charley and then to all the others. When they were smoking comfortably, Doctor Tanneyday returned to the conduct of his examination.

"We do not ask," he explained carefully, "that a man be brilliant or clever. We are afraid of brilliance, and we do despise cleverness. We want only that a man shall have an unsealed mind, and what is figuratively called a soul. It is not necessary that a candidate talk like the little lines at the bottom of the pages in smart magazines. In fact, we would

rather he didn't. The most violent outbreaks have been occasioned by such epigrams!"

"A fellow had better beware of epigrams," commented Charley.

"Yes, a fellow had. One man came in here and said, during an examination, 'God makes flowers and man makes automobiles. Man has never yet made a violet and God has never made a flivver.' We put him gently out. But another fellow said, 'Widows get along, because they know all about men, and the only men, who know all about them are dead.' We threw him out!"

Charley smiled.

"Well!" said Doctor Tanneyday. "You have been told enough about us for the present. It is your turn. Tell us everything you can about yourself!"

In the presence of this singular quartet, Charley discovered, somewhat to his dismay, that his impudence was inaccessible. He could not get at it. It was reluctant to perform. These strangers somehow made him earnest. Ordinarily, he never could be earnest in the presence of others. He had to be impudent; it was a protective device. Only when he forgot himself could he be earnest, and then his usual reward was ridicule.

Now, however, he found it impossible to be anything else but sincere.

"My trouble," he explained, "is that I don't like the world as it is. I want it to be as I dream it to be. And yet I do not know what I want it to be. I hate the commonplace!"

Alonzo Leverton made a significant face at D. D. D., who remained imperturbable. Doctor Tanneyday was watching Charley closely, and in this, he was imitated by Mr. Blessings, One by One.

Charley was presently launched upon his story. He told it quietly and resolutely, and with a sense of relief. Paradox

though it was, he knew that he was finding complete sympathy and understanding for the first time in his life. That sympathy and understanding was a light glowing in the eyes of madmen!

They heard him with close attention, fixing their eyes upon his face as if they possessed a secret geomancy by which they could read his riddle. Soon Charley felt warmly encouraged; their silent attention was full of kind assurance. At important points, their glances, one to the other, were sharp as rapiers.

He spoke freely. He even managed to tell his story merrily at times; always good-humoredly, and never a whine in his voice to evoke the lethal alms of pity. As he progressed, Charley emphasized not so much the people with whom he contended, as his inward revolt against the ugliness of his daily life. When he came to Constance, he described their relations easily, leading up to the why and the reason that they parted.

"The lipstick? That did it?" gasped Leverton, making a particularly ghastly grimace.

"It was only a symbol," admitted Charley.

"That was wonderful," commented Mr. Blessings, One by One, approvingly.

There was a chorus of approval.

"And who, may I ask, was that blatant, noisy, blustering person who met you here and turned you over to Jaeger?"

"That was the father of my wife," explained Charley.

"Ah-h——!" they all murmured.

"I have never seen a male villain in all my life," said Doctor Tanneyday abruptly. "I have seen female villains—plenty of them. Women are naturally villainous. But not men. They are always a mixture of good and bad. Now, Mr. Turner, I suppose you consider that father-in-law of yours a

villain. He isn't. I watched him, from behind the door, throughout the whole transaction. He wasn't a hypocrite. That man thought he was doing a righteous act in putting you here."

He paused, and turned to Charley suddenly, anxiously.

"Do my mustaches by any chance remind you of brushes?" he asked.

"No! No! Not at all. You see—there are different kinds of whiskers. There are whiskers—and whiskers. I think it's a case of different men, different whiskers!"

At this, Doctor Tanneyday appeared greatly relieved, and he immediately proceeded with the examination.

"Do you think you have any love left for your wife?"

"No! Only pity!"

"Ah! Pity!"

It was D. D. D. speaking, and his voice was solemn.

"Festerling pity that remains when love is gone," he added.
"Pity is death!"

"Do you pity her, *now*?" asked Mr. Blessings, One by One.

"I don't think I do," replied Charley, after reflection. "I just don't think about her at the moment. Perhaps later——"

"That's better! Do you love any woman at all?"

"No!"

The four inquisitors looked from one to another, as if the first disappointment of the interview had come. There was a minute of awkward silence.

"May I ask why?" asked Doctor Tanneyday.

"There is no woman left in the world worthy of the kind of love I have to give," replied Charley fiercely.

"How do you know that? Have you tried them all?" asked Doctor Tanneyday.

"I have looked into their eyes—their faces—and I read their hearts."

An intense quiet followed this remark. The eyes of the four seemed to be searching his soul. At length, Doctor Tanneyday said clearly:—

“Do you not believe there is a necessity for love in the life of a man?” he asked. “The love of woman?”

“Did Michael Angelo have a woman?” demanded Charley, suddenly truculent.

Doctor Tanneyday stared at him.

“Buennoerati was an invert,” he said slowly. “But if he had found the right woman, the Sistine Chapel would have been a nobler place!”

He got up and still stared fixedly at Charley. The light in his eyes was now like the phosphorescent foxfires that glitter in the trunks of dead and rotting trees.

“It was so with Da Vinci,” he said slowly. “Until he found *La Jocunde*. Somewhere Mona Lisa is smiling patiently as she waits for every artist—the woman with folded hands. And how her smile would redden, my young friend, if she knew that at this moment you were in a lunatic asylum!”

He turned to his companions,

“This foolish young intellectual,” he began—“We must talk about him. Shall we not?”

They nodded without speaking.

“Wait here, Mr. Turner,” said Doctor Tanneyday. “We shall not be long!”

They filed slowly out of the room.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE IDEAL IS IN THYSELF

IT was half an hour before they returned. Meanwhile, Charley had been examining the book-cases. At the wealth of literary treasure stored on the shelves he was delighted, and it made him hope the four extraordinary inquisitors would decide to find him eligible. He knew the situation had in it an element of the comic, even of the burlesque. Nevertheless he was in a kind of Rome, and he wanted to be a patrician.

Silently and soberly the four filed back, and stood in a row facing him. It was much like the return of a jury, after arriving at a verdict.

Doctor Tanneyday pronounced it.

"We have decided," he said, without parley, "that you may become one of the intelligentsia."

Charley blushed happily. His impudence had altogether fled. He was unreasonably pleased.

"Forty-two men have taken the examination and failed," continued Doctor Tanneyday. "You are to be congratulated."

"I am——" began Charley, but Doctor Tanneyday waved his hand impatiently.

"But we have more to say," continued the Doctor, caressing his mustaches nervously. "We understand very little about you. There is a feeling among us that you may be what the world calls—a genius. Who can tell? You seem to wear its nervous spell, somehow. We are tempted to believe that you are a creative artist. Again, who can tell? The fact is the world always crucifies its saviors—if not by nailing them to

trees, then by dropping them into pits, or locking them up in an asylum. You may be such a savior. Who can tell? But if you are, you have a long way to go. You have no art; you confess it to yourself. It is all locked up inside you. My young friend, we are going to give you a new name!"

"A new name?" repeated Charley.

"A new name. Peer Gynt. So far as we are concerned, you are no longer Charles Turner. You are Peer Gynt!"

"But why?" asked Charley.

"That will be told you in due time. We are direct here, Peer. We do not deal in subtleties. We want to help you find yourself. If you are a genius, we want a share in your triumph. If you are not, we want to help you to be happy. We have talked it over. Dinner is ready. Will you come—to our table?"

Over the dinner table, Charley learned a great deal about his four friends. They were all good friends from that moment forward. There was a grave and punctilious courtesy among them, and an underlying tenderness new and strangely beautiful to Charley.

The meal was served in a small room; he learned that the mob of ordinary lunatics were served in a large hall in the basement. There was practically no social contact between the two elements, he was informed; it was only rarely that the intelligentsia ever saw the others.

In the gay chatter across the plates, Charley learned something of the history of the four men who had admitted him into their companionship.

It appeared that Doctor Tanneyday was a specialist in throat diseases, who had married a dancer and later declined to divorce her. The lady had been—and still was—a bit masculine in her motivations, and had married the doctor purely for the sake of appearances. When he refused to let

her be free, she contrived to put him in a sanitarium. On what grounds she had put him there Charley did not learn.

There was a vastly different story behind the incarceration of Alonzo Leverton, the man with a thousand faces. It was his propensity to contort his features, screw up his face, twiddle his nose, writhe his lips, and otherwise disport and distort his features into unnumbered grotesques which made him a prisoner of this strange freedom. In repose, his face reminded Charley of Pan disconsolate, mourning because his pipes were out of tune. There was a goat-like contour to his ears that helped the illusion. Over the salad, he confessed to Charley an ambition to sing the bandit's serenade from the *Jewels of the Madonna*, and Charley promised to teach him to play it on the ocarino.

"Do you mind telling me why you make your thousand faces?" asked Charley.

"To shock people," confessed Leverton casually. "Damn it, you can't shock them any other way. They refused to be astonished, if you don't. People are so cursedly immune to shock, and wonder and surprise. I got tired of their composure. I want to roll their eyes and purge their souls with amazement. At first I considered doing magic tricks—sleight-of-hand. But I am not clever enough to be a *prestidigitateur*. But, I said, I *will* surprise them, anyhow; I will do the last thing in the world they would expect a grown commission merchant *to* do. So I sat at my office window and made mouths and faces at everybody who passed down Light Street. And for that—for that, mind you—I'm here!"

Charley smiled sympathetically. He wondered if the man were as mad as he made himself out to be. Had he not, himself, felt often the irritation of sustained composure when his soul was rocking with the dizzy frenzy of wonder?

The case of Mr. Harold Blessings, One by One, was even more astonishing. It seemed that he had been a student in Johns Hopkins University—a leader in his classes. He had

but one vanity. This was his ability to tie a perfect four-in-hand knot in his cravat. His skill in this had been the despair of the young gallants who were his friends. One morning, after years of success in business, he woke up bereft of his skill. If his life depended on it, he could not tie a four-in-hand knot. He was reduced to the degraded necessity of wearing ready-made bows. The shock unseated his reason. He brooded upon his lost triumphs, and finally had to be sent to the sanitarium.

"I can teach you how to tie it again," declared Charley.
"I'll trade ties with you, right after dinner!"

"Will you?" gasped Mr. Blessings, One by One, his eyes glittering.

Mr. Leverton kicked Charley discreetly on the shins, and Charley said no more. Later, when Mr. Blessings, One by One, was talking with his neighbor, Leverton leaned over and whispered:—

"Never let our poor friend get his hands on a cravat, my good Peer. Never! He will choke himself to death with it before you can stop him. Promise?"

"Promise!" repeated Charley, feeling suddenly depressed. How seriously was he to take these strange people?

And D. D. D.?

There was nothing said of him.

The initials remained a mystery with the rest of him. Often, during that first meal, his kind eyes were turned toward Charley; the beginnings of friendship were in their glances.

But he remained a mystery.

Toward the end of the meal, D. D. D. leaned over toward Charley and said:—

"Peer, you will have to watch out. Or you may be nothing more than a mad-house Kaiser. Remember? And I think Carlyle wrote a line about you. Didn't he say, '*The ideal is in thyself; the impediment, too, is in thyself. Thy condition*

is but stuff thou art to shape that same ideal out of. What matters it, if such be this, or that?""

The phrase was a javelin to Charley, reaching to his heart, and spearing it deeply—yet he knew, not yet deeply enough.

It was an odd time for Charley; a jumbled, happy, puzzled, and sometimes disappointing time.

When the door closed upon his father-in-law that first afternoon, and he became definitely an inmate of Wildthorn Rest House, as the sanitarium was called, a sense of chained bewilderment had overcome him.

This was followed by excitement. The singular experiences which he encountered almost immediately afterward had in them a merciful compensation. They did not give his thoughts time to stagnate into the gloom of brooding.

In the days that followed, he settled down to a routine. With his native abhorrence of compromise, Charley refused to attempt to delude himself. He was not content. Not, though the companionship of his four friends was, indeed, delightful. He missed something. It was his truant impudence. He could not be happy without it.

Regarding his confinement, he was of two opinions. If, as his friends prophesied, he was to learn that his imprisonment was a blessing in disguise, he did not come to that point promptly. He resented being made captive by the Strickers. Often he reflected upon writs of *habeas corpus* and lawyers. But he had no money. Lawyers always demanded money. It angered Charley to realize that Mr. Stricker had known this, and had not taken his parting threat seriously.

He was free of the Strickers and of Clara. That was a distinct advantage. And he was also free of his mother. That was another advantage. Two weeks had passed under auspices undeniably agreeable. His soul welcomed such a period of *dolce far niente* pleasantly enough. Charley realized that his vanity, more than his actual incarceration, troubled him.

There was a good library, and a second-hand Steinway on which D. D. D. played. There were long hours of spirited conversation, long hours of silent reverie, and then idleness, which was new and delightful.

In this idleness, Charley made an intellectual discovery. Observation of his friends had taught him that they were—all of them—actually insane. On one subject, each of them was definitely mad. In every other subject, however, they were not only sane; they had brains of a surpassing quality. They were rich thinkers. His discovery was that only men of imagination could go mad. It was an indispensable qualification, apparently. He was forced to the conclusion that it was better to associate with mad men of imagination than with sane minds devoid of imagination.

These philosophic and artistic four, into whose counsels he had been admitted, were, on longer acquaintance, surprisingly well. Through the remainder of the summer they fraternized happily. It was all very free. There were practically no restrictions upon them. The doctors called, now and then, asked questions, made notes, and went their way. The five intelligentsia, at least, were not required to do any work. The one prohibition was that they must not leave the grounds, a rule which no one had any desire to violate.

Now and again, Charley got glimpses of the mob. They were a drab lot, admitted at a reduced rate; men and women with wild eyes, weepy eyes, red eyes, and grins and grunts and eerie laughs.

On the second Sunday afternoon that he was there, Charley was told by Piggles that Clara and Mr. Stricker and Mrs. Stricker had called to see him, and were waiting downstairs.

“Piggles,” said Charley, “can you take a message?”

“I can take anything,” replied Piggles bravely.

“Then tell the party that I can’t come down—that I am spinning on my neck in the dance of the ding doodle,” replied

Charley. "Tell them that my symptoms are violent; that I am howling for a brush salad; that if I don't get a brush salad, I will come down there and make a meal of Mr. Stricker's whiskers. And tell them further that I am eating my fingers, joint by joint!"

"It ain't so!" said Piggles, with a catch in his voice. Piggles had come to have an affection for Charley.

"That's why I want you to tell them," insisted Charley, and Piggles, with a puzzled air, departed with the message.

Twice after that they had called again, but always Charley refused to see them.

When painted autumn came, rouging with crimson her withered cheeks, the long conversations that had been held in rocking chairs on the lawn were transferred to the library, where there was a rough-brick fireplace, with logs and kindling wood. Jaeger himself built the fire for them. Jaeger was an odd character. He affected to roar at them, but in his heart he had a profound respect for the intelligentsia. It was the kind of respect a man has for a fine clock that won't run any more. At the insistence of Charley, he had actually come to the point of a daily shave.

As the season advanced, Charley discovered that there was an improvement in himself for which he was grateful.

His impudence came back to him.

He decided its disappearance had been due to the shock of his change of living. The meeting of sharp minds, coupled with his imprisonment, had struck him out of his gay insouciance. But now his old pose was slowly returning, and with it, the old and beautiful incoherence.

Of his son-in-law, John Stricker had frequently complained that he was a somnambulist. There were times now when Charley wondered if the old brush manufacturer were not right. He felt very much as does a man who lingers with a

pleasant dream,—a sleeping that is always pleasantly unsatisfying, which is the best of dreams. For naturally, Charley was not satisfied. Instead, the old urgencies to publish beauty to mankind were more insistent with the cold march of autumn. Until then, his impulses had been merely lulled. Now they were astir again.

He felt an imminent sense of rebellion, and a break for action. All this had been pleasant, but it must not last too long.

And he felt he would know when the time came.

Often D. D. D. read aloud to them. He had a voice of quiet sympathy, the surest nuances of intonation and the most unerring discernment for emphasis in a phrase. Around him the four would sit in an interested silence, as he turned the pages of *Gil Blas* or *Reigen*, or perhaps something more droll. Their taste in literature was catholic; they were quite as willing to discuss Tarkington as Talleyrand.

They played no games. They had a fine scorn for chess, and for the lesser absurdities of bridge and kindred contests. All were agreed that such diversions were for an inferior order of intellect, developing only memory and a certain low cunning. In their eternity there was no time for such trivialities.

Of course, they quarreled. They would. There was, for instance, the sharpest disagreement among them as to the value of the work of Pablo Picasso and Andre Derain. Gradually, Charley came to understand that D. D. D. and Doctor Tanneyday were from New York City, and that both had traveled extensively. When an argument became too heated, D. D. D. would seat himself at the keyboard of the Steinway and play a nocturne of Chopin, or a shy and murmuring pastoral, or a gay waltz. Sometimes he would play an entire sonata through—the *Appassionata* was his favorite, and with it he could move their emotions superbly.

Manifestly it was a time of noble and splendid indolence. To Charley, it appeared at times as if life had stopped; as if all the ties of the past were sundered, and there was to be no difference in the future. Of that he was afraid, and yet there was a charm in its contemplation. A new diablerie was at work with his fancy; a conflict of mental conjuration; one part of him making beautiful pictures, the other snugly luxuriating in the joys of the present.

Finally, he spoke to them of his difficulties, and they counseled him in the most friendly fashion. Acting upon their advice, he invested largely in patience. They made him see that he was young, and that he could afford to take gleefully the mental vacation for which John Stricker and his brush business were paying. Never for a moment did they ask him to think of ending his days in a madhouse. Nor could they conceive of him returning to his wife and her relatives.

Their word was wait.

Oddly, though, his dreams were ugly,—of garments soaked in blood; of nude human figures, stealing shamefully through murky shadows, of gourmands and gluttons pawing disgracefully over plates piled too high with food.

Hope and faith were in him still. He was waiting, as he had been counseled to wait, serene in the feeling that the great adventure was still before him, somewhere behind the bend of the road.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

SCANDAL

AT Charley's house, events were moving most awkwardly.

Mr. Stricker was profoundly disturbed. In putting Charley away, he had acted according to his most secure convictions. His principles were costing him money, which was a fair test of their quality. It was standing him seventy-five dollars a month to keep Charley in the asylum. Mr. Stricker was beginning to pause and think. Meanwhile, Clara was renting out rooms in her house, but this was not sufficient to support her, and her father had to give her money.

The first roomer Clara had obtained was her sanctimonious insurance agent, Mr. Harris. He was sleeping in the room where Charley had formerly played the ocarino. Clara cooked his meals.

It was Mr. Harris who occasioned the deepest perplexity in the bosom of Mr. Stricker.

The more he observed how matters were going, the more Mr. Stricker felt that Clara should not see as much of the insurance agent as she undoubtedly did. During all that summer Mr. Harris took Clara out on car rides three nights a week. They rode together to Riverview Park, which Mr. Harris remembered when it was called Point Breeze; they rode down Fort Avenue, to Fort McHenry, and together on one Saturday afternoon, explored the labyrinth of the old star fortress, where the flag flew when Key wrote the Star-Spangled Banner; they went to Druid Hill Park, and Gwynn Oak, and on one never-to-be-forgotten Sunday they went all the way

to Emory Grove, where a camp-meeting love feast of the Methodists was in progress. Also they went to church and to prayer meeting regularly.

From the very beginning Mr. Stricker had found trouble with his conscience. There was always a bit of doubt lingering as to whether Charley really was crazy or not. Yet the doctors he hired had all said that he was. Mr. Stricker had argued with himself that there wouldn't be much harm done to put Charley in the asylum for a little while, anyhow, and see how matters went.

Now that there was an intimacy developing between Clara and her roomer—an intimacy that was becoming almost a *liaison*—Mr. Stricker took thought seriously. Perhaps if those doctors were hired again, they might find that Charley was cured. Then they could bring Charley home, and Mr. Harris would be handled.

Mr. Stricker didn't want any scandal in *his* family.

So greatly did the matter agitate his mind that he went to Clara's house one Sunday morning, after Sunday school, and gently hinted it would be a good thing if Mr. Harris were to give up his room and go elsewhere.

Clara was instantly indignant.

"I just guess not!" she blazed. "What do you think I am? You ought to be ashamed to sit there and talk like that to me. Day in and day out I'm trying to get along here, with a husband in the crazy asylum, and then I have to stand for a talk like this, as if I didn't have enough to stand already. You must think I'm some kind of a child. I guess I'm a married woman, that's what I am, old enough to run my own affairs. I'll tend to my own affairs, pop, thank you, without any help from you!"

In astonishment Mr. Stricker stared at his daughter. There was certainly a remarkable change in Clara. The taut weariness of her features was gone; there was a sparkle in her eyes,

pink in her cheeks and lips, a roundness to her figure, long, long absent, and a fresh swing to her stride.

Mr. Stricker went home, greatly puzzled and concerned.

He did have a talk with Henry about it.

Henry was even more indignant than was his father. Henry was keeping company with a girl, and he had definite ideas about the proprieties. But Henry laid it all to Charley. Henry thought it was a good thing Charley was put away when he was. Clara was acting the way she was because she had taken in some of Charley's weird ideas on moralities. The good Lord only knew what she might have been doing, if she had stayed with Charley much longer.

This was a new angle, and Mr. Stricker considered it gravely. But he could not assent to its correctness. Sensing opposition, he said nothing of his plans, but he contemplated bringing Charley home just as quickly as he could.

What continued to trouble him was the cavalier manner in which Clara had received his advice.

"If you want to know," he said to his son ruefully, "what effect my advice has on Clara these days, just stick your finger in a pail of water and pull it out and look at the hole."

Henry grinned, in admiration of an undoubted original. But the grin awakened no response in Mr. Stricker's heart. His corrugated brow was indicative of deep worry.

"My son," he said, "I hope *you* never desert your father. I've tried to make a comrade of you, my boy. Will you ever forget that 'Father and Son' dinner the church held two years ago? I think that occasion cemented a bond between us, son. Never forget the things I've taught you—that a pound of pluck is worth a ton of luck; that when a pusher enters the race, it is a safe bet that he will beat the knocker to the goal, and that the man who does no more than he is paid to do is never paid for anything more than he does!"

"Gee, pop! I never *can* forget those originals," Henry assured him.

Throughout the family Charley continued to be the most interesting subject of conversation. Cissie, who was up in Pen Mar, had sent a postcard containing her photograph taken at High Rock, and had scribbled on the bottom, "What do you hear about Charley? Beware a silent husband and a dog that doesn't bark!" Which wasn't bad for Cissie, although it didn't fit the circumstance.

Of course, there had been much talk of the visits to Charley; the visits that had ended in not being visits because Charley refused to visit with them. It was odd that always Mr. Stricker and Clara went away with a sense of relief. Not one of the family had seen him since they put him in the Wild-thorn Rest House.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE GREAT CONSPIRACY

LATE in the autumn, Jaeger told Charley some disturbing news.

“Say!” he called to Charley. “You ain’t such a nut as whut you was when you came here!”

“I’m gratified,” Charley assured him with a flourish.

“I mean you’re cured!” explained Jaeger, lowering his voice.

“Cured of what?”

“Of being batty, of course. They’re gonna take you home!”

Charley stared at him without speaking. Jaeger grinned, rubbed his clean chin appreciatively, and went away growling and chuckling.

Jaeger had no idea that his news was not of the most pleasant character.

To the wise old lunatics who were his friends, Charley forthwith confided his problem.

“My noble fellows,” he said grandiloquently, “there was once a popular song, the refrain of which ran:

“Don’t take me home,
Please don’t take me home!
Tell me what did I do to you?
Oh! Oh! Oh! Oh!”

Smiling around at them, and bowing after the fashion of a vaudeville artist, Charley continued:

"A blatant and vulgar ditty, my masters! A stench in the nostrils, indeed! But truth was ever a stench in the nostrils of the world! And this is truth. By the warts and corns of the apostles, this is truth. They want to take me—home!"

"You mean—" fluttered Alonzo Leverton, making a hideous face.

"Yes!" said Charley.

"Yes?" groaned Doctor Tanneyday.

"Yes!" repeated Charley.

There was a long silence, while Charley sat down, and looked at them.

"What must be done about this?" asked Mr. Blessings, One by One, finally.

"It is a dark and stormy night, gentlemen," retorted Charley. "The wind howls and the sleet is hissing and sizzling against the window. It is a night of all nights for a conspiracy. And we must have a conspiracy. For I warn you, gentlemen, I will not go back to brushes!"

"He is wise not to go back to them," commented Mr. Blessings, One by One, dully.

It was D. D. D. who at length spoke sensibly.

He held in his hand a copy of Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*.

"Peer," he said quietly, "it is odd that this should come to pass just now. For we have been talking about you. We have, in effect, been hatching a conspiracy for you. We have given a great deal of thought to you, when you knew nothing of our thoughts. And we have come to a conclusion about you. You have yet to find yourself—and we believe we are now ready to help you do that!"

"I shall listen humbly and reverently," said Charley. "It is true I haven't found myself. I know that! I am all attention!"

"You are the twentieth century grandson of Peer Gynt," D. D. D. continued quietly. "He did not get into the mad-house until well after middle age. You are already here."

They do things more quickly in the twentieth century. If you really understood yourself, Peter, you could make the most beautiful of your incoherent dreams assume a tangible form, and at length a reality! You could do that, if——”

D. D. D. paused.

“If what?” prompted Charley eagerly. It was so seldom that D. D. D. spoke.

“You see, Peer,” said D. D. D., “we have all come to believe in you here. Implicitly. We believe you have genius, and that there are things for you to do with that genius, in a tawdry, impatient world. We want to help you. But we are afraid for you. We fear you will finish like Peer Gynt.”

“I have never understood these eternal references to Peer Gynt,” returned Charley testily. “I read the play. I don’t see the connection!”

“What was the one distinguishing characteristic about Peer Gynt that set him apart from all other people?” asked D. D. D., suddenly in deadly earnest.

“His imagination,” returned Charley promptly.

“Exactly. Precisely. But how many people have grasped that, as they read the play? That is the only important idea in the whole thing—that Peer Gynt had imagination, and the others had not. And that is the most important thing about you. You have imagination; the Strickers and Turners haven’t got it. Do you see?”

Charley nodded thoughtfully.

“I do see that,” he conceded. “The only important thing about any one is whether he has imagination or he hasn’t!”

“Not at all!” protested D. D. D. with a slight show of warmth. “There are other qualities. And that is just what I want to talk to you about. You haven’t got them!”

In surprise, Charley stared at him. The man’s soft eyes were kindled with a light that was an accusation.

“I don’t understand!”

"You do not. Neither did Peer Gynt. But we must not go to the other matters until we have exhausted imagination. For you have a vivid and brilliant imagination. The question is now—what are you going to do with it?"

Charley moved restlessly.

"That is what I have been trying to find out for the last five years," he said. "All that I can find in myself is a rag-bag of incoherence. And here I am in a lunatic asylum!"

"You could have fared worse. Here you may find the key to all that the heart hopes for. It is largely bound up in your imagination—if you use it right!"

"Sounds like Coué," said Charley. "The imagination is superior to the will and all that."

"Your future is stirring now within the womb of your dreams, my Peer," replied D. D. D.

"How can a man organize his dreams?" demanded Charley. "All that I can do is to writhe in an incoherence of beauty and horror!"

"It is now my time to speak," said Doctor Tanneyday. "D. D. D. has told you that you possess the immense power of imagination. That can express itself in various ways—in the arts, or the sciences, or even the trades. With you it must be one of the arts. Yet you have no art. And you are no longer a child. The study of art should begin in childhood. Your problem is not an easy one!"

"Do you believe it is too late for me to learn an art?" asked Charley.

"No one can tell that. I, for one, do not think so. But that can only be proved. And after you have proved that, there is even a larger hurdle, which I am afraid you do not even suspect is there!"

"What is that?"

"Presently. In the meantime, I shall tell you something of our friend D. D. D. It will hurt him, but he has asked me

to tell you—for it may save your immortal soul from perdition. He tried to be an artist. A painter. He failed. Not until it was too late did he discover that he was following the wrong art. God intended him to be a musician!"

D. D. D. covered his face with his hands.

"There is a possibility," continued Doctor Tanneyday, "that you might make the same mistake. You do not know whether to be a composer of music or a painter. I think the latter. We all do."

"But——"

"The logic of it is simple. You see everything in pictures. By music you have always found it impossible to translate those pictures. Perhaps if you drew them, or painted them——"

"I have sketched all my life—but no one ever noticed," protested Charley.

"That is a good argument for our theory," said the doctor. "If you were a natural artist, you *would* always be drawing things. And who in your family would notice even a masterpiece? We wonder if you would be willing to make the test? Up in his room, where D. D. D. has seldom let us come, there is a little studio. He has invited you into his room. Would you like to go up there now?"

A crash of understanding was in Charley's heart as he looked into the pale face and wet eyes of this mysterious D. D. D. Gratitude brought a catch into his voice, as he said:

"I'd—I'd like very much to try!"

D. D. D. took his hand as he stood up, and then they walked toward the door. As he was passing out of the room, Charley turned and cried out, suddenly:

"And what was the last hurdle you said was waiting for me?"

Doctor Tanneyday waved his hand gently.

"At the very last you shall hear that!" he said.

It was a puzzling experiment.

Charley knew almost nothing of the technique of drawing, but he drew vivid sketches. Of the way in which an artist sets to work to make a picture he was ignorant. He did not know how to hold a palette, to touch brush to pigment, or color to canvas.

Yet in the serene little room which was D. D. D.'s, with the colorful sketches hung on the walls—and the portrait of a brown-haired girl with soft eyes, over the dresser—he found a new confidence in himself.

There was something stimulating in the very mechanical work itself. It was as if a door had been opened in his head, through which some of his visions could get out.

"You see," D. D. D. told him patiently; "your trials are all before you. Most art teachers would tell you you are too old to begin. Your fingers are not at the formative period; there are any number of reasons why you shouldn't try!"

"But I'm going to try!" said Charley huskily. "I always wanted to draw and paint."

They were in the studio that first, cold night for more than two hours, and they brought good tidings to their waiting companions after their first lesson.

"There is," said D. D. D. judiciously, "a distinct and vivid evidence of talent. To make it amount to anything will mean almost unbelievably hard work; so hard as almost to terrify. But Peer says the price is all too little; he'll do anything!"

"But"— Charley was suddenly white with anxiety—"but how can I go on, when they want to take me home?"

Doctor Tanneyday came up and laid his hand on Charley's shoulder.

"We have been talking of that," he said. "Of course, D. D. D., with all the will in the world, cannot make you an artist. He can only begin your education. You should finish it in New York and abroad. Six months with him, and you

will be ready for real study. After that—long years. You might be forty, fifty——”

“If I have to work until I am a hundred years old, and then can paint one good picture, I shall be satisfied,” said Charley. “I don’t mean to be maudlin. But I’m damned grateful to you all! All this is a great surprise to me, you see. I never knew I wanted to paint so eagerly before!”

“This matter can be arranged,” said Doctor Tanneyday. “We will have to bribe the doctors!”

“Can you bribe a doctor?” asked Charley innocently.

“Oh, yes—we have funds!” said Leverton proudly. “We will make them insist that Peer remain here six months longer. And after that——”

“After that,” said D. D. D., his eyes strangely aglow, “the great conspiracy!”

CHAPTER TWENTY

A FLIGHT IN THE DARK

THE doubt which had shocked Charley, and which he had refrained from expressing, was sufficiently serious.

Here he was, in a lunatic asylum, practically in the custody, and thoroughly under the mental domination of four of its inmates. Was he wise in submitting to their amiable dictation? Were they not, perhaps, far madder than they appeared? Perhaps a sane art critic would say Charley was a hopeless fellow who could never paint a stroke. Perhaps he was wrong to abandon his old insolence, to yield himself as a young student in an academy of philosophic lunatics.

He decided that he did not care. He was interested. His daily lessons in art were of entrancing appeal. And now, as they put books into his hand about the great metropolis of New York, a shadowy vision of the city became a permanent dream in his mind. This rocky island of Manhattan became a precious hope within him. He dreamed upon it as upon some fabled town in the Arabian Nights Entertainments.

Some day he would journey there, and make his dreams come true.

Indeed, he was beginning to be jubilant. He was inspired with new thrills. Utterly ignorant of the first principles of painting, faced with years, or perhaps decades of labor before success might be his, handicapped by his age, which gave him so late a start, and with no idea of where the money was to

come for his education, he nevertheless went singing through the days of the next six months.

"I'm the first student who ever studied art in a lunatic asylum," he would chuckle. He worked hard; feverishly, from early morning to late, and under the patient teaching of D. D. D. he made encouraging progress. He was learning the bare rudiments of an immense art, and from himself he was learning a marvelous new thing—the joy of doing what he loved best to do.

It was almost perfect, that fall and winter. Once or twice, notably at Christmas, his relatives tried to see him, but he still consistently refused. They sent him Christmas presents; he was dumbfounded to find that Clara and Mr. Stricker both sent him technical books on art. Later he learned that Doctor Tanneyday, who seemed to have a magic of his own, in the affairs of the asylum, had written them what to send.

Under the glow of such kindness he wrote a letter to Clara and one to Mr. Stricker, thanking them and wishing them well.

To his dismay, he received immediate replies, both of which informed him that he was to come home within a few weeks.

Thus again the conclave of the four wise old lunatics and their young protégé was assembled.

On the table lay the latest sketch which Charley had completed.

"Whenever there is anything kind to be said to you," began Doctor Tanneyday, addressing Charley, "D. D. D. breaks his silence long enough to say it. But whenever there is anything disagreeable to be said to you, I'm elected!"

"So this is going to be disagreeable!" commented Charley.

"It's about that final hurdle. We all are sure now that Nature intended you to be a painter. Whether you ever become one or not will depend on you. But we know—or we think we know—that you will never amount to much as a painter, unless something vital happens to you."

"And that is——"

"An emotional release. You are too damned intellectual. Everything comes to you through your brain. You're cold, Peer. You don't feel things!"

"I feel beauty!" defended Charley.

"You don't feel beauty as you would feel it if you felt human emotions," argued Doctor Tanneyday. "I am afraid, my poor Peer, you have got to suffer. You have got to know tenderness, and tears. Those are the pigments lacking from your palette. By and by you will have all the technique you need. But you will not be an artist until you have emotions. And you will have to know the greatest of emotions—love. And you must know the tragedy of death! Then—and I am afraid not until then—will you express the genius that you undoubtedly have!"

Charley grinned.

"It sounds like a character analysis," he said. "But I want to be sure what you mean. Do you mean that I shall have to fall in love?"

They nodded solemnly.

"And love brings in its trail all tragedy, and all the other emotions," said Leverton, with a new face.

"But I can't!" cried Charley tragically. "There isn't my kind of woman in the world. I want Venus. And Venus is dead—at the bottom of the sea!"

"The day shall come when the sea gives up its dead," said D. D. D. somberly.

It appeared they had arranged everything,—except the love affair which he must find for himself.

Charley knew this meeting was an occasion of solemnity, with something of the rending of human hearts beneath the surface. It appeared that they planned for him to make his escape one night within the coming week. Before that, however, there was to come another parting.

"I, too, have been called home," said D. D. D. sadly.

"Home?" repeated Charley, incredulous. Somehow, one thought of the asylum as definitely and finally the home of D. D. D.

"I have been pronounced sane!" he said, lifting his brows singularly. "I am cured! Cured! My friends all—and especially you, Peer—I wish you to remember that as a master-stroke of lunacy. I deceived them and made them think me sane. Truly I am mad! But I knew their tricks. There was a purpose behind my shoddy sleight-of-hand. It was shameful to play so ignoble a part. I wanted to show them just how mad I could be, did I care. But I dared not. Now I am free! Free for the one thing in life there is left for me to do! Remember always, my good Peer, that the best way is the madman's way! And I shall go—*that way!*"

Charley was puzzled. He turned to discover that the others had slipped off silently. He was alone in the room with D. D. D.

"Peer," said D. D. D. gravely, "you must believe always that I was insane. And you will not evade a madman's whim?"

Charley took his hand and pressed it.

"I want your coat, Peer. I want some papers that were yours! I want—your ocarino!" said D. D. D.

"You shall have them," said Charley, aware of something vast and tragic which he could not touch or see.

That night D. D. D. left, carrying with him the friendship of all who had known him. In his neat leather bag were packed Charley's ocarino, his coat, and a few personal papers which D. D. D. had requested as a keepsake.

The second parting, a few nights later, was an occasion of even greater solemnity.

Charley could not fail to observe the subtle alteration in his three remaining friends; a change which had begun even

before D. D. D. had taken his bag and gone. They smiled no more, except a few wise and weary smiles that masked something of more tragic solemnity, of deeper wisdom than they were willing to disclose.

Now they were gathered, speaking in whispers, in the studio where D. D. D. had taught Charley the rudiments of his art. It was well after ten o'clock; the rest of the asylum inmates were sleeping, except Piggles, who was purchased for the conspiracy.

Charley was taking with him nothing at all. He wanted to fare forth with only the clothes on his back, and these he wished speedily to exchange. He would begin his adventure in dreamland as a new man.

It was of this that they began to speak.

"We know," said Doctor Tanneyday quietly, "that if you are to be left unmolested for the pursuit of your own soul, you must lose every shred of your old personality. Charley Turner must die. Otherwise your father-in-law will use all the machinery of the law to find you and drag you back. It is not an easy thing—but we have managed it!"

Curious. All eyes averted. None to return the keen and questing glance of the man who was running off to dreamland.

"They will believe that you are dead," continued Doctor Tanneyday. "And that is well. We, ourselves, are only poor old lunatics, each with a separate and incurable delusion. Our chances at our dreams are dead. We had them, but we did not nourish them. Do not repeat our mistake, young Peer. You are sane, now. If you make a mistake, you may easily become as mad as we are. We sit here, and dream out our lives, content enough. But now is the time for us to drive you out. It is a sacred duty. We cannot escape it. We believe we are meeting that obligation—valiantly. We love you, Peer!"

There was a full moment of silence.

"We break our hearts. But the dreamer shall not perish in the pit. He may not evade his rescue; the caravan from Egypt comes!"

And now they surprised him greatly. In his hands they placed five hundred dollars in old bills. Among them, they had been able, somehow, to accumulate it. It was an offering out of their love. Charley demurred. But they told him dollars were a part of dreams, and so he took it.

"One word more!" said Doctor Tanneyday. "You came to us, a rebel, impatient of life as it was, eager for life as it might be. A dreamer, incoherent in his dreams! We gathered you to our hearts! Perhaps we tyrannized over your mind—but now you are free again. But you shall never be free of your responsibility! You have made a solemn contract! You must never forget that compromise with you is impossible—you must be faithful to your dreams—even unto death!"

He clasped their hands without speaking. A knock came at the door. Piggles was waiting. It was time to go.

"I shall write you!" he promised, huskily. "Under a new name I shall write you—Peter Gaunt!"

"Good-by, Peer!" they said, in a whispered chorus, and he closed the door, to follow Piggles blindly down the staircase.

And thus it was that Charley Turner crept off the grounds of the asylum, to the silver promise of the open road. The night winds murmured, and the young trees sighed, as he waved back at an upper window, where three strained faces, wet with tears, saw him depart.

The coward moon was in hiding when he got off the car at the little railroad station which the Pennsylvania Railroad considers adequate to the city. The sky was muddled with clouds and in the cool air was the damp promise of rain. Charley did not mind if it rained or snowed or blew. This

hegira in the night was too new and startling an experience, comparable to nothing previous in his hopes, and possessing the bright luster of an incogitable adventure.

With a lordly air, he bought his railroad ticket. He did not buy a berth. In a vague way, he knew that people slept on trains, but only a dead man could sleep on such a night as this was, and was yet to be.

In the dim-lighted day coach, he found a seat next to a window. The greasy faces of snoring Italian laborers flung in frightful attitudes of uncomfortable sleep did not injure his enthusiasm; instead he beheld a wild and frantic still horror upon them, and horror is the wildest cry of beauty.

The long roar through the tunnel was a shout of victory in which his soul joined lustily; the swift rush out into the familiar reaches of Northeast Baltimore, the dark, drousing streets, with the pale tapers of the corner lamps, were possessed of new, dim thrills, studied through a car window and a blur of a deepening mist.

Soon it began to rain; by the time they were in the open country, thundering over the Gunpowder River, the downpour was steady. One could see only a little through a window. Charley lay back in his seat to admire the face of a lonely girl in the seat across the aisle, and then sat up to watch the glitter of the raindrops, beaded brightly on the windowpane. Against the engulfing darkness of the outer night he watched those glistening water-drops, as they were jolted across the glass by the train's oscillation. They were like diamonds, alive and crawling.

In everything he was able, in the high pleasure of his flight, to find beauty present and passionate. The lonely girl had smiled at him. Her smile was like the greeting of a Madonna. He must speak with her.

There was a sudden, terrific jolt, and the train came to a grinding halt. Voices were soon shouting outside; many of

the passengers got off into the rain to learn what had happened.

But Charley dreamed on, careless of blatant realities.

In the *Sunpaper* the next morning, the following item appeared near the bottom of the Baltimore County notes, sandwiched between a Halethorpe marriage and a Towson funeral:

LUNATIC KILLED BY TRAIN

Charles Turner, an inmate of the Wildthorn Asylum, was run over by the New York midnight express shortly before one o'clock this morning and instantly killed. Coroner Detcher gave a verdict of suicide. From the testimony of the engineer, who frantically blew his whistle, and slowed down his train, the man stepped deliberately in front of the train with the intention of ending his life. The body was so horribly mangled, that identification would have been impossible, but near the scene papers were found, in a coat which the man had removed before his tragic act, and these identified him. There was also found a small toy ocarino. At the home of the man's relatives, it was stated that one of his delusions was that he was a great musician, and the ocarino a noble instrument. Turner is survived by his widow (Mrs. Clara Turner), his mother (Mrs. Laura Turner) and others. No arrangements have as yet been made for the funeral.

Had the reporter known, he might have added to his obituary a new parable:

Greater love hath no man than this; that he lay down his life for his friend, and not let his friend know about it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

THE GIRL WITH THE RICH SMILE

THE red-stained wheels turned and turned, onward to the rocky island of dreams. Past the window of Charley's seat in the day-coach, the rain and the darkness swept blindly. There was a whisper of exultation in the wet swish of the rain against the glass. There was the rhythm of jubilation in the turn and turn of the red-stained wheels.

The girl across the aisle had smiled at him again. Her smile was captivating. He gave her a full glance of appraisal. Her dress was cheap. But her smile was not cheap. How was that? A cheaply dressed girl should have a cheap smile. He wanted to smile back at her, but the splashed window was calling.

Art and woman. He was between them again. A man must decide between them. The old lunatics were mistaken. He had suspected it for a long time. An artist was not concerned with love; he was snared in the mesh of the great *intrigante*, art. He would look out of the window, and forget the cheap girl with the rich smile. And he would think about himself.

Life was like that. The window of art on one hand. The smile of a woman on the other. It was preposterous for his mad friends to assert that he must find love before he could express beauty. He should have told them that. Curious! How they had dominated him! He was not running off too soon; his soul would soon have been in vassalage to their ideas.

He rested his burning cheek against the cold damp of the

window. How throbbing with excitement he was! Until now he had not realized it. His blood was flowing with a buoyant exhilaration; he was sensible, too, of a relieved consciousness of release. Where was his gratitude? Those madmen had been kind—pompous old Doctor Tanneyday, and mouthing, grimacing Leverton, and gentle Blessings, One by One. And D. D. D.

D. D. D. had gone home! Curious! One wondered where his home was! No doubt he was asleep now, somewhere, home!

Charley leaned back, luxuriating in the swift rotation of the red-stained wheels that bore him onward to the island of dreams.

What was it he wished to do? With a startled jump, Charley came back to his reflections. For a few, surprising moments he had abandoned them, while he gazed into the eyes of a woman, reflected in the glass of his window. Intrusive woman! Always envious of art!

He frowned, and she settled back in her seat; the reflection of her, a softened reflection disrobed of cheapness, faded and vanished.

He had been playing at cross purposes with himself. It seemed quite natural not to have known this before, and to know it clearly now. There was a fire in his brain that lighted up everything. He had wanted two things, and to achieve desire in this world, one must want only one thing and want it damnably. First he had wished to create, out of dead things, living things; out of cold, warmth; out of darkness, light. Beauty! The only word; the Lost Word! Beauty! Deliriously and feverishly he had wanted to create beauty. Already he had started to learn to paint; by and by he would know how to make manifest unto others the beauty he himself could see.

There was desire enough to serve a lifetime.

But he was a fool. He knew he was a fool, and he called himself that resentfully, as he pressed his cheek against the window. He was a huge fool, a very giant of a fool. Any man was a fool who sought an ideal woman. He had decided that long ago; didn't he know that Venus was dead. Why, then, should he resurrect the cadaver of the old and buried riddle?

The true artist was no such fool. He wouldn't be a fool any longer. He had a new name; Peter Gaunt was his new name, and Peter Gaunt would seek for no ideal woman. Peter Gaunt would be a Greek, reincarnated out of the fifth century before Jesus. The Greeks were no bondsmen to their emotions. Their marbles were faultless, but cold. They were the true artists; they were no fools; they calmly chiseled their perfect women out of stone, and wasted no time in pursuit of the flesh that cannot endure.

Art and love could not be mated. He saw that clearly. He had hungered for love. That had been a waste of time. Curious! How clear it seemed now. The lunatics were wrong. They had said he could not be a great artist until he had found a great love. Bah! He could see beauty in a blind world. That was gift enough! He would point out the beauty. That was what an artist was—a pointer-out.

The girl across the aisle was crying.

Why should a girl with a rich smile like that cry? It was an offense. The girl should be reproved and made to smile.

Charley stared at her, his eyes full of pained rebuke. She was a little girl. About ninety-five pounds; certainly not more than a hundred. Red hair. The redness was real. Her face was nicely featured, a sloping oval, the violet eyes set wide apart. The lips were a surprise. They were curved treasures worthy of a harem, but they were smeared with a crimson paste. Those lips formed the girl's singular smile.

Her nose was lovely. Her perfume was atrocious. Her coat-suit of green serge was wrinkled and cheap.

But why should she cry? Did no one else observe that a girl who could smile like that was crying? Charley glanced around the car. The Italian laborers snored and sweated; every one seemed asleep.

"What's the matter with you?" he demanded sharply.

The girl put down her handkerchief, wet with tears and perfume, and looked at him, fully startled and insulted. He wondered if she meant to make a scene. Cheaply dressed women did make scenes. He smiled disarmingly.

She caught her breath, and her smile came through the tears. The transformation was startling. Her smile was beyond capture or analysis; quick, elusive, and with something elfen and rapturous in the swift movement of the arched lips.

"Oh, nothing!" she said slowly. Her voice was sweet and musical.

"Then stop it!" said Charley. "It's a nuisance!"

It was getting colder in the car. Too cold to rest even a feverish cheek against the window-pane. The wash of the water against the glass was chilling to contemplate. After half an hour, Charley glanced again at the girl across the aisle. She had opened her hand-bag and was powdering her nose.

Powder-puffs! Lipsticks! Yes, she had a lipstick and was using it now! Bah!

She turned and in her full gaze Charley saw that her violet eyes were still washed with tears. They were lovely eyes, but now a glitter shone in them. Once, maybe, they had been eyes as rich as her smile. Now they were violet eyes, fringed with mascara.

"Well, of all the nerve!" she exclaimed, and Charley felt defeated. Such scornful amazement was devastating. As he

returned to the cold window, he encountered her reflection and, to his astonishment, he saw that she was smiling again.

He turned abruptly.

"Why don't you go to sleep?" he demanded.

"Why don't you?" she countered.

"I can't," he found himself replying.

"I can't, either!"

Then they looked at each other. Just as frankly as he was studying her, she was studying him. Evidently he was as different to her as she was to him.

"Guess we'll soon be getting into West Philadelphia," she said earnestly, with a friendly bob of her head. Her turban was green.

A wet-faced Italian, sprawling beside her, next to the window, turned like a great beast, opened huge eyes and showed gleaming white teeth.

"Shat ap and go to sleep!" he growled.

"Shall I tear out his tongue?" asked Charley, with his old grin. She gave him a terrified glance, as if she really believed him. Then she got up and tiptoed across and sat down beside him.

"Don't you say another word," she said, in an agitated whisper. "Never start a bum argument with a dago. They're devils!"

Again she bobbed her green turban in unassailable conviction.

"He's snoring again," said Charley, struggling with contending feelings. Now what was he to do? The cheaply dressed girl was sharing his seat with him. Art once more invaded by flesh. He sniffed at the perfume disagreeably.

"It's hell not to have the price of a sleeper, ain't it?" she said, with a quick glance up at him.

He nodded mechanically.

"Was that why your pent-up feelings sought release?" he asked.

"What?"

"Was that why you were crying?"

"Oh! . . . No!"

The red-stained wheels were grinding on the rails; the train was slowing down into the long gray vaulted station of West Philadelphia. The girl opened her purse and her thin, white fingers moved swiftly among coins and bills. She stopped, the purse still open, and stared calculating, at the ceiling of the coach. Decision came hardly into her violet eyes. She closed the purse with a snap.

A fat boy in a white coat stormed through the door of the car. A basket of fruit and sandwiches was on his arm.

"Let's get something to eat," suggested Charley.

Her glance was shocking. For the first time in his life Charley saw a glance of leaping hunger, unashamed, stark.

"How many can you eat?" he asked, as he beckoned the fat boy.

She looked up at him, her expression beyond anything he had ever seen in his life.

"Say, listen!" she said. "I know you're hard up, too, or you wouldn't be riding in a day-coach. But if you can afford to buy me a sandwich, I can eat it!"

Charley grinned.

"I can afford to buy the whole basket, and the boy, too," he said. "How many can you eat?"

"Six!" she gasped.

"Fat boy!" said Charley. "Give this lady six sandwiches!"

"What's your name?" asked Charley, when she had finished the fourth sandwich, and had begun unwrapping the fifth.

"Melodie."

"Melodie?"

"Yes! This is good cheese!"

"Who gave you that name?"

She gave him a sharp glance.

"You don't think you can get personal so soon because you bought me some sandwiches, do you?" she asked.

"You're a very difficult person," said Charley severely. "You cry, and you powder your nose, and you're quarrelsome, and you wake up Italians who want to sleep!"

She smiled at him then.

"Now you're just kidding," she decided. "I guess you'll be wanting to ask me my age next. Well, don't you do it!"

"I have never been guilty of the *gaucherie* of asking a woman's age," protested Charley virtuously.

"You called me a lady in West Philadelphia," she said. "What's the matter—don't I wear well?"

"Melodie," said Charley, "you disarm me. Your name enchant^s me. It is artificial, like most of the rest of you, and yet the man who bestowed it upon you was an artist!"

She dropped her sandwich.

"How in the name of God did you know that?" she gasped.

"Know what?"

"You know what! How did you know I worked for an artist?"

"I didn't know——"

"You did! You just said so!"

Charley was enlightened.

"I just guessed it," he said. "You are a model?"

She kicked the sandwich with the toe of her slipper.

"I guess you think that's sinful," she snapped.

He laughed.

"No! I don't believe in sin!"

She smiled at him once more, and reached for her last sandwich.

"I guess you think you're a regular devil," she laughed.

They did not speak again until she had finished her sandwich. Charley gallantly procured her a paper cup of water. In continued silence, she again opened her purse, and busied

her hands with lipstick and powder-puff, taking quick, anxious glances into a tiny mirror in the bag.

"Thanks!" she breathed, as she closed up the purse and settled back in the seat. "They were sure good! . . . Say! You didn't get any for yourself!"

"I was not hungry. My body is seldom hungry!"

"My God! You're a lucky guy!" she declared emphatically.

"Are you often hungry?"

"I'll say I am!"

"Was that why you were crying?"

"Say! Didn't you ever see a woman cry before?"

"Often!" snapped Charley, with a sudden, vivid memory of Clara, day in, and day out.

"Well, then, what's the matter with you? If it'll do you any good, I'll tell you my cry was all bucolic."

"Was all what, Melodie?" asked Charley, in an astonished gasp.

"All bucolic!"

"Where in the world did you learn that word?"

"Oh, I heard an artist say it once. I'm a bucolic girl. You can't make any more out of me. It's been tried and it can't be done!"

"Melodie, you are——"

"Bucolic! That's me! You know, it is not fashionable to be bucolic in New York any more. It's all right back home—but not up there. They laugh at you if you try to pull any of that stuff. You've got to be sophisticated. It's all right to talk yourself to death about stuff nobody understands, but you're a damned fool if you cry about the things you do understand. See?"

"Bewildering Melodie!"

"Say, are you trying to kid me?"

"Cross my heart and hope to die! I used to say that when I was a little boy!"

"And I used to say it when I was a kid, too!"

Those violet eyes were not glittering now. Something else peered through.

"Say!"

Her thin, white hand tightened around his elbow, and her face, smeared with red and dappled with powder, looked as serious as a clown in a dressing tent.

"I'm going to *tell* you why I was crying. It'll do me good to tell—somebody!"

He waited.

"I ran off to New York with a press agent," she said. "He came to Baltimore with a show. He promised to get me on the stage. That was what I wanted to do. Everybody laughed at that in Baltimore!"

"They always do," said Charley.

"That man didn't kid me," she said, defensively. "He didn't promise to marry me, or anything like that. He was on the level all the way through. I was old enough, and I was sick of making straw hats. So I just ran off with him—wrote a letter and told my mother just what was what. I'm not sorry now, either. I'm glad I tried. But I wasn't good enough. The man I went with did everything a white man could do. I got try-outs everywhere. But I just wasn't good enough. I'm still hoping for another chance this week, though. So I had to do something else—and I did!"

"Where's the man?" asked Charley.

"He's got the T. B. and he—well, he went out to Arizona. There is nothing that's to be said against him, understand. He was a man! But I'm funny. I never forgot my mother. Up in the studios they used to laugh at me. At first they said I'd get over it. But I never did. She never let me do what I wanted, but I loved her, just the same. That's the way it is—bucolic stuff. You think you can forget back home—but take it from me, you can't!"

"And so—" prompted Charley.

"So one day I said to myself, I'll go back home. I'll just drop in on mother and see what she says. That was night before last. I had saved up about twenty-five adollars and I come down on the midnight. But say, mister—my God! I felt *awful* when I got to the old house. It's out in Waverly. I stood at the corner of the road and just looked at it. The old fire pump where I used to play was still there. And the yellow roses were still growing over the front door. Mother loved those roses as if they were babies. And while I was looking, the door opened and she came out to get the bottle of milk. It was *awful*. She looked so bent and so old, and those old steel spectacles of hers was up on her forehead and—oh, say, it was *awful!*"

"What did you do?" asked Charley.

"I run! I couldn't stand it! I just couldn't!"

"You didn't see her at all?"

She shook her head.

"It's funny, I know. It's all mixed up. But somehow I knew it was better—for her—not to!"

She began to cry again. She was frail and tired. Charley put his arm around her waist; her head came against his shoulder, and soon she had sobbed herself to sleep.

The perfume was atrocious; the eyes of the conductor were a malignancy. Yet Charley did not stir. He held her, and thus holding her, looked through the window, beholding the miraculous coming of the morning. Its slow discovery was an experience never to be discounted.

Until the last tick of eternity he would remember the warmth of the girl's body at his side, and the fabulous unfolding of the fog that covered the outer world. Over all the landscape it seemed to cling, softly damp, spreading and deepening; a mystic mist from the ocean, gray child of the vanished rain. He loved it for its mystery, and the magic of its languorous power. Blear landscapes were blurred into enchanted wildernesses by the gossamer thaumaturgy of the

brume. It was like a shroud, hiding from him not only the actual world, but the face of the future too; he could not tell whether the veiled face smiled or frowned.

His arm ached from its long caress around the form of sleeping Melodie, but he did not stir. He was thrilled to be a witness of the magic of the fog, working its sway over the ugliness that man had accomplished. Silently, yet completely it was smoothing into airy shapes the rough bulks of factory buildings and concrete railroad bridges, and iron buttresses and stark, black metal poles. The blatancy of the billboards was obliterated by the great white enchanter, Fog!

Upon the rushing panorama of the window there was an awesome sense of the lovely and the unreal. The mist was pearling the rusted rails with a milky glimmer and over the dull reds and faded yellows of stranded freight cars it spread a canopy of gossamer.

Cold beauty and woman's warmth! A mirthless paradox! By what should he assay his trembling ecstasy? Not a tremor of his delight would he willingly surrender. The snug nestling of that little body against his was no less dear, no less precious than the gray sorcery at play outside the window. His bright eyes were unwearied from the long vigil of the night; they grew wet with mist at the mere beholding of the phantomesque trees he passed, swaying with a wan and spectral dignity.

Everything was beautiful. Here in this moment was the impossible marvel achieved. Art and woman were with him, and he was in a flame of happiness. Could the lunatics have been right, after all? Nothing at which he gazed was without a part of the hour's benediction. The brown earth, upturned in the plowed fields, blushed a purplish pink beneath the airy touches of the vaporous dawn. Through the haze, green meadows smiled gently. Then, as the iron caravan which bore them both swept on, he saw an asphalt road, glistening and shiny as the ebony mirror of a magician,

breathed upon by the damp drift. The red-stained wheels turned and turned, forward and farther forward to the rocky island of dreams.

Surely good must come from this. Surely his startled joy must be a prophecy of unbounded surprises to come. This morning fog was a high symbol, not to be misinterpreted. Its chastening ministry could not be ignored.

Its very presence sang as a fine choir of the immutability of intangible things. It was a witness to his dreams. It was a rebuke upon realities. Those piles of wet, black railroad ties, and rusted-red spare rails, heaped on yellow stretches of sand, were like barbaric altars, wild and beautiful.

At last, through the creamy veiling of the mist, a circle of pale fire came in, round as a metal platter, heated until it glowed. Before long, the sun was a flaming yellow circle in the empurpled sky, and its Midas touch made the world glitter brightly, and everything was plainly visible.

With the fog, his mood passed.

It departed hurriedly and silently, with only a few lingering traces of the unreal. At first the iron girders of bridges glistened with dark purple flushes, but all too quickly they turned a hard and silvery black in the clear morning sunshine.

Melodie stirred restlessly. Her lips parted, not in a smile, but a gasp. She opened her eyes and stared at him.

“My God!” she exclaimed. “Who are you, anyhow?”

It was not necessary for him to explain. She remembered, and disengaged herself from his arm with a child-like embarrassment.

“I’ve got to wash up!” she said, and trudged swayingly down the aisle to where a sign announced “Women!” He turned crossly to the window. The train was rushing swiftly

past the station platform of a small city. Charley had a fleeting look upon a little man, rolling a huge hand-truck, loaded high with green trunks. Behind him came a big man, pushing a little truck, containing but one trunk.

The fog was altogether vanished.

The world was waking up. Melodie came back, her face washed and refinished with generous powdering and rouging. She smiled at him beautifully.

"Do you want to sit next to the window?" asked Charley.

"No. I've seen it all before," she replied. "We'll be in pretty soon."

They passed a woman in a blue kimono, holding her laughing baby up to the kitchen window to behold the hurling train. Then out into a stretch of open farmland, where a boy in a brown shirt and khaki trousers and a man in blue denims were toiling with long-handled rakes. Around them were patches of olive and emerald grass, between the rutted farm fields of purplish brown earth. No traces of the white glory remained. Soon they came into another town, full of cross-legged black chimneys with thin arms of pipe leaning grotesquely on the flat roofs of factories. Family wash flapped feebly in the breeze, between lines of jagged houses; flopping blue jumpers, red flannel shirts and sickly yellow drawers.

On another station platform there was a green-slatted hand truck, with wheels pricked with peeling rust. Beside it stood the solitary figure of a bearded huckster. His hair was matted and dirty, and his basket was of filthy brown straw. It was heaped with unripe oranges of greenish gold, fat purple turnips and red and green cabbages wabbling at its edge.

"Manhattan Transfer! Change here for downtown New York!"

For half an hour, Charley had not spoken to Melodie, a silence she had accepted with complacent composure. Now he turned to her suddenly.

"Is this where we get off?" he asked sharply.

"Depends on where you're going, old trooper. You change here for downtown. If you're going into Pennsylvania station, you sit tight for ten minutes more!"

Charley hesitated.

"It doesn't really matter," he said absently. He was studying Melodie. The girl had smiled. A smile is an amazing and dangerous thing, even in a cheaply dressed girl, and most especially if it is a smile rich in charm, and mirth and the astonishments of the intangible.

He should have turned away. She was cheaply dressed and—not vulgar. There was something in her that redeemed her from vulgarity. Perhaps it was her smile.

He was absurdly conscious of the fact that they were nearing a parting. Obviously he wouldn't, he couldn't, get to know her. But he protested against such a sharp cleavage. She would smile and disappear into the mad dance of seven millions of human beings and he would never see her again—and she was the only one of the seven millions with whom he could claim acquaintance.

"Don't you know where you're going?" she asked.

"Yes! I am going to breakfast—with you!" he said suddenly.

A shadow fled across her violet eyes.

"No! That won't do! That won't do at *all!*" she said.

"Why not?"

Her face was serious, stripped of all smiling.

"Uncle Alec expects me."

"But we can go to a restaurant."

"No! Can't be done!"

"Melodie! Why not?"

"Can't you see for yourself? You're different. You're

like some men I've worked for—artists—only you're different from them even!"

"Strange little Melodie! Cheap and wise! There is something different in you, too. I wonder what it is?"

She smiled at him gratefully.

"I guess that's a compliment. But it's hell to be different from everybody else. I oughtn't to be bucolic, but I am!"

They were nearing the tunnel.

"Have you ever been to New York before?" she asked him suddenly.

"No!"

"Wait a minute!"

She found a scrap of card in her pocket, and a little pencil. On this she wrote rapidly.

"Here!" she said, thrusting the card into his hand. "This town is funny. You never can tell when you need a friend. I'll never forget those sandwiches—and, old trooper, I'll never forget you. I can't eat your breakfast—but if you ever get up against it, come and see me!"

The red-stained wheels turned and turned as the iron cavalcade of cars plunged into the tunnel beneath the waters. Charley breathed in of the strained air deeply. The journey was over. The task of the red-stained wheels was faithfully performed.

Charley Turner stepped out to the platform alone, and exulting as a pilgrim who had come to the shining gates of the Temple that is called Beautiful.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

THE ROCKY ISLAND OF DREAMS

THERE is a city that is built upon a rock. It is a winged monster of riven stone, crouching upon the shore of the sea. Its body is the body of a beast; its hands are a man's hands, but the face and the heart are a woman's, tender, capricious and cruel.

None who pass that way escape her terrible inquisition. Her riddle awaits all travelers, and the time for the answer is short. If one be quick, her recompense is ready; the dangerous prize is her kiss. Upon your peril may you stammer and hesitate; her patience is intolerant and murderous.

One must be quick!

Where she crouches is the abiding place of the complex exhibitionitis; the capital of pretense; the garden of upstarts. Out of the rock, the thing starts up violently. Of brick and mortar, steel and concrete, its giant wings are fashioned. Out of its squalor and shame come its heroes and princes, upstarts all.

Here are the streets of imposture; the highways of sham; the lighted avenues of make-believe.

Yet here, too, are shining paths, trod by dreamers walking to the stars; and that is the sorry catch to the riddle of the young sphinx.

There are men who love the creature as a bride.

"I love her!" they sing. "I have taken her, yielding, into my arms, and I have found her sweet. She has brought me place and power and a rich dowry. I love her!"

Those who thus sing boastfully are men who were quick and agile in their wooing. One must be quick!

Others curse her as a harlot.

"Damned bawd!" they shriek. "You tempted me! You made me a liar! You made me a thief! Worse than that, you made me a fool! You played me for a sucker!"

These men were disciples of a very ancient fool, whose idol and whose image was a tortoise. One must be quick!

Still others, with the daring encountered in despair, despise her. To despise New York is the unpardonable sin. Such men are like birds with broken wings, who know they shall never fly again. They drool and they drumble and croak:

"Town of dead hopes! You strike silent singing lips; you blind glowing eyes; your cold finger stills the high beating of the heart of youth! Snide wonderland of the Wholly American Empire!"

A thousand men have a thousand sayings about her; seven million men utter seven million sayings, and all are different sayings, and most are contradictions, and every word of it all is true.

This is the mother of Main Street, and she giggles and sneers at her own child, blood and bone and flesh of her own peculiar blood and bone and flesh, and she giggles and sneers at her own child, because, God damn it, the child is deformed!

"Quick!" she cries. "Quick! Quick! Quick!"

One must be quick! Subway, elevated, taxicab—quick, quick, quick! Everything is quick or dead.

"Be quick!" is the inexorable mandate of the monster. "If you would have my riddle, be quick! It's worth it! So be quick! I am It! The Great American It! I'm a big It and a quick It! Back home they are slow and little. There's nothing back home like me! I'm big and I'm quick! Be

quick and *you shall be big!* Take a look at my sky-line! The Woolworth Building's sixty stories high. And look how quick we built it! Fifth Avenue! And Broadway—dear old Broadway! Quick! Quick! Quick!"

Quick walking! Quick eating! Quick sleeping!

The poor man runs quickly up seven dark flights of stairs, to his room on the top of the tenement. The rich man rides up quickly to the fourteenth floor of his apartment house. Both must be quick.

All in an hour here, virtue may be bartered for a career, and both parties to the bargain be cheated. Hungry rebels plot their revolutions which shall destroy the constitution and its amendments in twenty-four hours of bloodshed. While they plot, their masters talk in brittle and staccato chanting of how labor must be taught its place, now, quickly, once and for all!

If the children do not learn to be quick quickly, they die or are crippled by the quick trucks and pleasure cars that rush through the streets which are also playgrounds. If they do not get their lessons quickly, God help them all, for the schools are bulging, and new babies are born in seven months here.

It is the first city of the Jews; nearly two million of them are slaving madly to get rich quick and live on Riverside Drive. They are a quick and agile people, and when the lips of the Sphinx shape and utter out her riddle, they do not stammer in their answer.

For their wisdom came that way; throughout the ages they have known that the penalty for them of sloth and hesitation was death!

It is the city that seduced the Hudson and violated her shores. Once she lay, trembling and virginal, knowing only the pure touches of the stars. Now she is the old bawd of

commerce, wearing as her jewels the yellow glitter of electric signs.

It is a place of too much and too many.

Too many quick men. Too many quick women. Too many quick children. Too many delicatessen stores, where wives can dish up a quick meal of canned soups, frankfurters and potato salad. Too many restaurants, and not one worthy of a gentleman's appetite. Quick service! Quick check! Quick indigestion!

Insensate, brutish faces, with thick lips muttering prayers, rush up and down its streets. Those hurrying faces that stream on north and south—faces powdered and rouged, or scarred and lined and wrinkled, laughing faces, crying faces, old faces, young faces, worried faces, drunken faces—all in a hurry!

Morning they hurry to work. Noon they run to their greasy bundles of lunch, to the scurry of the cafeteria, the rattle of Childs, the hub-bub of the hunting room at the Astor; to better eating rooms and to worse, but to one and to all they hurry.

Evening they hurry to be gay, and to be gay one must be wicked, and they will not linger to be wicked and so they are merely vulgar.

The tantara and fanfaronade of its revelry is blown in march time on a penny horn. In its midnight cabarets the people dance, not seductively as the old courtesans, but jumpily, jerkily, jazzily. They are sodden with wines which Nero's stablemen would have emptied to the swine, brewed over night and a stench in the nostrils of amiable Bacchus.

They want the grand gesture of Paris and Vienna, but they are too much in a hurry to learn; they know nothing better, therefore, than thumbing the nose!

"I am bad and I am glad I am bad!" cries the city. "Hurry

up! Let's raise hell! This is synthetic stuff but it's good! Baal! Baal! Baal! Baal is our idol! The god of pleasure is our God!"

But the idol came from the ten cent store. It is a cheap clay Billikin, and it laughs. A middle class Greek of the fifth century before Jesus would have lifted his brows, drawn closer his tunic and passed on.

One must be quick!

Into this power house of quick energy came Charley Turner, the man who dreamed; Charley Turner, who had changed his name to Peter Gaunt; Charley, who believed that Manhattan Island was a refuge, an asylum for the knighthood of visionaries. A Joseph, carried into Egypt on a caravan of red-stained wheels.

What was to become of him there?

As he mounted the steps from the platform, he was quick to observe a change. The passengers swarmed and eddied past him quickly; men who had lounged and sprawled in the cars were now possessed of a quick impatience, and hurried upward, as if bent on immediate business. The shuffle of swift feet was about him; the sound of swift, stacatto conversation was in the air.

Somewhere in the astral ether, where words run on and never die, a poignant question was still vibrating; an enigma raised by the voice of Mr. Stricker, bushy and skeptical:

"And we shall see what will become of his dreams!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

FREE!

THROUGH the labyrinth of Pennsylvania Station; through gray-railed tunnels, concrete aisles and marble corridors, Charley walked, until he came suddenly, taken by surprise, into the vast, uplifted rotunda.

He was filled utterly with joy, and the promise of joy. As a spiritual convict, reprieved from an eternal sentence, he stood there, thrilling to the marble immensity. To him it seemed then that the gray stone reaches of the vaulted nave sang with him in his exaltation. The beams of morning sunshine filtering through were golden strings, whereon the fingers of his soul played a psalm of jubilance.

He was in dreamland! He was free! Free in the city where anything may happen at any time—and quickly.

Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!

He was pleased and delighted with everything that his eyes beheld.

For that first day he abandoned his eyes to a debauch. He forgot to find himself a room, or buy himself a breakfast. It was enough for him that he might wander through those amazing streets. Not until nightfall did he remember the occasions of food and shelter.

It was in the early spring twilight. He had stopped at a crossing on upper Broadway, struck with the purple palisades, and the warm glow of lights in a lonely house upon the distant height, and the solemn green flowing of the water.

Towering walls of apartment houses rising right and left hemmed in the sides in perfect concentration.

"That is beauty," he whispered.

Jostled by those who passed by him so quickly, he nevertheless held his ground, until the mothering dusk hid away the picture, as if he were a child who had looked upon it long enough.

Here he made a discovery.

Within the reach of his arm, where he had stood, there was an arched gateway, like a secret entrance in an old-world street. Above it was a swinging sign, carved in the form of a rooster, and on the sign was lettered, "Pomander Walk!"

"Well!" said Charley to himself. "I must look at *this!*"

There were steps, leading up from the gate, and he saw the pale glimmer of a lamp. Tingling with boyish curiosity, he entered. At the top of the steps he halted with a low exclamation of pleasure. There was a courtyard of mysterious little houses with gardens, facing each other across a narrow walk. At either end were two lighted lanterns on iron posts; the smell of lilacs drifted idly on the young night wind.

Outside was the mad merry-go-round of subway, elevated, taxi, dinning under, above and in and out the highways of Harlem. Yet by mounting four stone steps, Charley had entered into a cloister where beauty was plainly a daily prayer.

He saw that a little old woman had come from one of the houses and was moving toward him. Stepping aside, he lifted his hat.

"Good evening," she said pleasantly. "Were you looking for anyone?"

"I was admiring," he replied. "I envy the people who can live in such a place as this!"

She stopped and appraised him gravely.

"I take in roomers, if that is what you mean," she said.

She was a Mrs. Church, the widow of a naval officer, who had written a book. Three roomers were in her little house, a teacher of dancing, who had classes in Carnegie Hall, a newspaper columnist, and a young man who worked vaguely with the moving pictures. There was an attic room, if the gentleman cared to see it.

The gentleman preferred to arrange for it, then and there, before he saw it.

Thus Charley completed his first practical transaction on the island of dreams. The price was high; he realized, distantly and hazily, that he would have to think about money. One would have to earn while one manifested beauty. But not to-night. To-morrow would be time enough, and perhaps, again, too soon.

To-night, he sat idly there at the window of his attic room with its dormer window; sat there partaking of the lilac fragrance; losing his eyes in the deep purple shadows of the courtyard; gathering again to his heart his old, banished incoherence that was now reclaimed and with him.

In his ears there was a new song, beautiful and terrible. It was the low speeding buzz and hum of the streets and houses all around and about him. The atomic rhythm of the city was pounding its restless beat into the pulses of his soul.

Upon him stirred a new and wistful restlessness. He heard a call, clarion to action. An eager yearning to do and do and do seized him; it was like a mysterious and earnest invitation.

"I shall be quick!" he covenanted there at the window.
"I shall be quick with my dreams!"

There was an institution of which the four wise men of the lunatic asylum had informed him; the Young Artists Association, where one acquired counsel, technique, and, it was remarked, inspiration.

There Charley applied. Promptly upon the morrow he

went there, not without a certain trepidation. Nor was this all. There was an obstinate and incoherent rebellion in him that made him dislike the undertaking. His experience increased this obscure distaste for his matriculation.

What Charley had expected was a solemn ushering into the presence of bearded men in velvet jackets, who would make inquiries of him, sound his soul, and test his intentions. There was nothing of such an expectation.

Instead, he came to a lobby, with oak counters much like those behind which hotel clerks assign rooms and distribute mail. Leaning casually across the counter which he approached was a girl, whose bored and detached serenity was irritating. She did not wait for Charlie to explain, but shoved a white and blue card toward him, on the blank lines of which he was requested to supply various details of his private life.

On every line he wrote a flourishing lie.

"Is there no examination?" he asked.

"No."

The reply came, not from the girl he had addressed, but from another standing at his side. Charley turned and saw that she was observing the signature, "Peter Gaunt," at the bottom of the card.

She was a golden-haired girl, of a distinctly physical suggestion, except for the clever and inquisitive blue eyes which now met his gaze. Her attire bewildered him; there was a dash and certitude in it which baffled and charmed him. He had not before met a woman dressed so conqueringly.

"You see," she explained easily, "the instructor gives the class half a day to sketch. Then he goes around and weeds out the impossibles."

"I see," said Charley.

"I hope you'll like it," she continued, smiling at him encouragingly. "What class did you apply for?"

"Life class," replied Charley.

"I am in the life class," she exclaimed, as if that were a fortunate coincidence. "It's great—and I know you'll like Mr. Stockbridge. It's the only co-ed life class in New York."

"Yes," said Charley quietly. "When do the classes begin?"

The girl behind the desk leaned forward, smiling at nothing.

"In three weeks the summer session starts," she said. "You'll be notified when to show up!"

"Thank you," said Charley, with an inclusive bow, and departed.

"Helen Saylor, you're the worst heart-breaker I ever saw," said the girl behind the counter vengefully. "Why didn't you leave him alone?"

"I think he is a most interesting type," replied Helen.

"God help him now!" said the girl behind the desk.

As Charley emerged to the street he was singularly annoyed. His rebellion was growing in his soul. It was all so business-like. What would Raphael have said had he been asked to fill out a card?

And that girl! Her eyes were too blue, too inquisitive, much too clever!

In those weeks of waiting that followed he traveled the island from end to end, bravely and with delight.

To him it was titanesque, bountiful of weird new beauty, filled with awe and mystery. Alone he walked, a triumphant vagabond. The solitude of mobs satisfied him. In it he walked, cloaked in a warm garment of loneliness; a mantle of dreams. Then he had no wish to share his solitary wonder.

"Surely," he would reflect, "all this is just as I would wish it to be. What can take this from me?"

His soul made immediate answer to him. Nothing must be permitted to take this from him. He must keep to the lonely paths, seeing and thrilling. But he must transmit his

thrills; he must point out what he saw. That was the obligation of the artist.

"Here there is neither neighbor nor gossip," he reflected. "Here I am victoriously let be. Every man is bent upon his own hopes, too busy to tell me what I should do with mine. That is freedom!"

It was as childhood revisited. When he was a little boy in Baltimore, he ran away, barefoot and alone, to behold the marvel of the ships and wharves. Here he was alone once more, the unmolested witness of new prodigies.

When one is born again, one becomes as a little child. In the domain of the young sphinx, little children grow up, as is the fashion there, quickly.

Once, in the evening, he stood at the library corner, looking up to the lacy minaret of the Bush Terminal tower, with its gold aura flung against the purple canopy of the stars.

To him it was as Aladdin's magic palace, lifted in clouds instantly by the rub of the enchanter's ring; a page torn from the Thousand Nights.

Squalor? Hunger? Shame? That and worse he read in the phantasmagoria of faces everywhere.

"And what of that?" he asked himself. "There is a beauty even in squalor; the hands of hunger and the eyes of shame are not for nothing. They would be more ravenous and more ashamed, did they not have all this!"

A curious pleasure came to him on the buses of gold and green. To him they were magic chariots, rumbling out of his distant childhood. Always he had wanted to ride on a circus wagon; this boyish desire flamed anew and was satisfied when he rode from Washington Square far up into the city.

It rained one night, and he had to sit inside, downstairs, gazing happily through the rain-drenched glass. This made him think of the post-chaise days of old England. He began

to wish he were on a three-day journey, and that presently they would ride to the lighted windows of a tavern, famous for its roasts and ale.

He had seen the sleepy kisses of the rising sun pressed lightly on the lotus buds in the northern spire of the Catholic Cathedral. And he had watched the fleet coming of the dusk, clad in lavender and sandaled in gray, upon the Turtle Bay Colony, just off Third Avenue.

In Hell's Kitchen he had found a restaurant, frequented by Italian *banditti*, who cut their coarse bread with stilettos, drawn from their shirts. Here Caruso had feasted liberally on spaghetti. Charley had it from the waiter, who served him steaming black coffee in a glass tumbler. Here, too, he had tasted of the *pièce de resistance* of Paradise—Zavillioni, golden and fluttering, smoking hot, odorous of strong, boiling rum.

There was now a light in his eyes, startling even to strangers. Impatience was born in him, a fierce, impulsive child. He must soon begin. Quickly! Quickly! These beauties were quick beauties. He would make new ones, even more quickly, and infinitely more beautiful.

Then came a letter from the Young Artists Association. The summer night class was beginning; he was to report the next evening.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

NUDE!

To his first day as an art student, Charley brought more than his new portfolio, papers and charcoal.

A fever of energy was in him, burning the brighter, perhaps, because of the cold contrast of another conflicting impulse. The idea of being instructed annoyed him. He was, curiously, annoyed at himself for this annoyance. He did need instruction, did he not? Well, he supposed that he did. Well, then!

That did not end his inner battle. Something invisible within him was offended; he was committing *lèse majesté* against that something, nor did his mental suasions placate the insult.

There was thus a cold lethargy in his muscles and a bonfire in his veins.

The life class was two flights up.

With his mind and heart in hot and cold dissension, Charley climbed the stairs. At the open door he paused. He saw a large room, walled with frosted windows. Nearly a hundred men and women were busy, arranging their chairs, or talking excitedly. His distaste increased.

In making himself kindred with these chatteringers, he felt there was something of degradation.

“Why is that?” he asked himself irritably. “Who am I that I should be superior to these strangers? They cannot share my dreams, I know. But I must share their practical knowledge. Is not that so?”

Another part of him, regal and uncompromising replied: "Who taught Shakespeare to write? Or Michael Angelo to make a picture?"

"That is the fancy of a fool," he argued angrily.

"You do not trust your dreams," reproved that other voice in him implacably. "Who are these people? They are the illustrators of next year's magazines, the designers of to-morrow's candy boxes."

There was no reasoning with the voice of impulse. He deafened his ears unto it, and went in.

He made himself known to the monitor, a certain Mr. Jessups, whose mustache was pale yellow, and who spoke in a hollow and authoritative roar.

"Mr. Peter Gaunt," he repeated. "Yes, indeed. Your chair is in the next to the last row. We will soon be ready to begin."

It was evident that Mr. Jessups was important, and to be treated with deference. Would the class instructor, Mr. Stockbridge, be like Mr. Jessups? Charley had the uncomfortable premonition that he would.

After the example of the other students, Charley upturned a chair in front of him, and upon it he placed his portfolio. This ritual of initiation was completed by fastening the drawing paper to the portfolio with wooden clasps. They were like wooden clothespins, those clasps; patent wooden clothespins; the kind of clothespins Clara had always found the most reliable for her weekly wash.

As Charley sat back, prepared to wait, a tall girl, with yellow hair, walked from a door in the rear. Around her was a loose green kimono. Moving with an unconscious stride of coquetry, she waved sportively to two students as she passed. A small stool stood in the center of the floor. She mounted this, and then carelessly threw back her kimono, letting it fall into the indifferent hands of Mr. Jessups.

She was completely nude.
Naked!

Here was woman! Here was woman bared! Here she was, stripped of pretense, disrobed of imposture, undressed of her shams! The contrivances of conniving tailors were peeled off and cast into the indifferent hands of Mr. Jessups. What remains here, upright upon the pedestal, is Truth!

This, now, was what lay underneath the velvets and silks, and the gay wardrobes of the world's boudoir.

No devices here! No coverings, costumes, raiments or habiliments! Nothing but woman's flesh; the flesh of woman and the unguessable principle which makes it move.

Almighty God! Like unto this, Your handiwork, was Aphrodite?

Let us look upon it together, You and I.
Naked!

His sensations were incredibly incoherent.

All unprepared, his soul had been struck a blow. Upon this naked girl, as upon Truth itself, he had come, as a man, reared in a dark room, is at last thrust rudely into the light.

Through bleared eyes he watched.

The pallid Mr. Jessups was calm. He would be. Mr. Jessups had seen many nude models. And had he, or had he not, what cared he how God had made them? The students were calm. What cared they?

Mr. Jessups casually suggested a pose. With a practiced grace, the model assumed it. She, too, was calm. The class was calm. Already they were sketching with their charcoal pencils.

The naked model was bored.

Perhaps Almighty God was bored. At least He was calm. He would be.

But Charley?

Here was what woman was like at last!

It was the first time he had ever looked upon a nude woman. Clara had never bared her charms to his husbandly eyes. Behind a closet door, in the dark of the bedroom, she had disrobed in modest silence, as became a typical, God-fearing Christian wife.

Now the veil that concealed the body was lifted!

The assault which the sight had laid upon his senses left him dazed. Somehow, all the women of his dreams had worn clothes. He was helpless in the struggle of stupendous thrills and repulsions. What his eyes had beheld had awakened within him something titanesque.

What could it be?

He sank back, with a low murmur of pain. Behind him he heard soft laughter.

"Is this your first night in a life class, Mr. Gaunt?"

It was the girl who had spoken to him the day he had registered. Her eyes were roguishly curious and friendly; her lips parted in a smile.

Charley stared at her. He was wondering if she was like the girl on the pedestal, when her clothes were taken off. His stare and his silence were rude. She flushed.

"It is the first time I have ever seen a woman," he said simply.

"Really, Mr. Gaunt? How naïve of you!"

He did not reply, although he still returned her gaze reluctantly. Afterward she was to recall and puzzle upon the incoherent sparkle in his eyes. The moment was awkward. This man called Peter Gaunt seemed a maker of awkward moments.

She laughed again, low and defiantly.

"Just wait a little while," she counseled, lowering her eyes. "An old French scientist says the shock of nudity lasts only forty-five minutes—even with the most impressionable. I was a bit staggered myself the first time I drew from a male model!"

His smile was incoherent.

"Forty-five minutes?" he repeated. "I should have said forty-five centuries!"

"Oh, Mr. Gaunt!"

The shadow of Mr. Jessups came between them. His voice, hollower now, and much more authoritative in public reprimand, spoke:

"It's against the rules to talk, Mr. Gaunt. Miss Saylor knows that. I'm surprised at you, Helen!"

The shadow moved on. Charley said to her:

"Forty-five eternities!"

Then he turned back to look again at the model. He had welcomed the rebuke. He did not wish to talk with Helen Saylor, though her eyes were attractive to him. He wanted to look at the model.

Within him were awakened unfamiliar forces, angry and contending. Their struggle was their own; all the while his intelligence seemed to be standing to one side, a bewildered spectator in the theater of his spirit.

While she sketched, Helen Saylor kept an eye upon her wrist-watch, smiling good humoredly at some amusing secret of her own. This mysterious and naïve red-haired youth intrigued her; she used the word in her mind; "intrigue" and "engage" were words to use in her set that season.

Precisely forty-five minutes after Charley had turned back to look at the model, Helen touched him lightly on the shoulder.

"What do you think of her now?" she whispered.

"Think? Who can think about her? I feel her!"

She gave him a quick, baffled look.

"Feeling what, Mr. Gaunt?"

He made an incoherent gesture with his hands.

"Don't you think she has a beautiful body?" Helen persisted.

For a moment he stared at her intently. Then he said:

"Her flesh is like cream and rose leaves. Her very muscles smile and sing to me. But her soul howls out to hell!"

He had made another awkward moment. By discovering a disproportionate line in her sketch, Helen Saylor managed her embarrassment cleverly enough, but there was a pause.

"Mr. Gaunt," she faltered, after a while, "What can you possibly mean?"

He pointed to her portfolio.

"May I see what you have done there?"

After a scrutiny of her half-finished sketch so brief as to be an insult, he returned it carelessly. She flushed, but he did not see. His mind was drifting from her questions, like an unmoored ship, caught in an eager tide. His emotions were enacting a melodrama, and the struggle stirred him, though he had no clew to the obscure plot of the play. But Helen was importunate; the more remote he became, the more he appealed to her mind.

"Why aren't you drawing?" she whispered.

"What shall I draw?" His smile was quaint and unfathomable.

"Mr. Gaunt, I think you are trying to make yourself deliberately difficult. If it's your line to act like that, it's good."

"Shall I draw that girl's body? That is what you were doing!"

"That is what we are all doing," she replied in bewilderment. "That is what you are supposed to do!"

Her words annoyed him. The revolt of that majestic mystery within him broke out in swift, angry phrases.

"What about her soul?" he demanded of her. "Her soul that howls out to hell? They do not teach you to paint the soul here, I see. The physical is all that matters. Forty-five minutes is enough for the soul—enough for an eternity of art. It makes me think every picture of every woman that ever was made was a lie! Even the most impressionable

get over the soul in forty-five minutes! Bah! I tell you that genius has occult eyes that see the spirit—the form must convey it! Do you see what I mean? You sit there and stare at me as if I were mad! I tell you God is still waiting for a man who can paint Woman!"

She was offended.

"Who is this genius?" she asked pertly. "Where is he to be found?"

He laughed, and the timbre of his laughter was a fresh and sharper insult.

"That girl's body is a cypher in which is symbolized the secrets of her soul," he declared, laughing impudently, in a high and insolent conviction. Having read her antagonism, he would now feed and water it. "It is only necessary to read the meaning of this muscle and that curve and yonder ligament and you have a picture, not of her body but of her!"

"You seem suddenly very sure, Mr. Gaunt. But you have not told me—who is this genius who shall paint the picture God wants done—of woman?"

He laughed again.

"Who knows?" he said mockingly.

"*You haven't drawn a stroke, Mr. Gaunt. Why don't you show me what you mean—in a picture?*"

He looked at her full in her angry eyes; the eyes that he thought were beautiful. The expression in them now was intolerably familiar to him. It was an old light that he hated; the cold and envious and destroying glitter that had become a permanency in the eyes of Clara Turner; the contemptuous reproof in the eyes of Mr. Stricker and his wife and his son Henry and all the old brood of those who did not like his dreams.

"Well! Why don't you show me?" Helen repeated.

For the first time that evening he lifted his charcoal pencil.

"I will!" he said, and, turning, bent over a white sheet of paper.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

WHITE BODIES AND BLACK SOULS

MUSCLE and curve and ligament!

Thighs and torso and the white swell of unmilked breasts!

Yellow hair and blue eyes and red lips!

Signs and symbols in the mysterious free-masonry of the soul; signs and symbols unrevealed to children; known only to the master workmen, brothers of the Living God!

The scrape of his pencil across the rough toothing of the paper was as a bell-stroke in the high tower of his soul. The fighting forces postponed their inner combat, mastered by something mightier even than they.

He would draw a picture for her. He would make muscle and curve and ligament tell their awful story. With what occult perception he beheld the truth he knew not. The strange girl upon the pedestal was patent to him, somehow, because he could read and understand her muscles, curves and ligaments.

In every stroke of his pencil he would write the truth!

The winged monster stirred. What was this at its talioned feet?

A traveler, ready for her riddle!

None who pass this way escape her terrible inquisition. The time for the answer is short. If one be quick, her recompence is ready; the dangerous prize is her kiss. Stammer and hesitate upon your peril; her patience is intolerant and murderous.

One must be quick!

Jason Stockbridge, the instructor of the night class of the Young Artists Association, was a figure in the city. He combined a sharp business acumen, with the valuable trick of dramatizing his physical appearance and his personal mannerisms.

He acted his part cleverly, in a city where clever acting is at a premium.

Almost seven feet high he towered; a giant with the fancy to be a pirate; a teacher of young students who liked to pose as a Captain Kidd in well-tailored clothes. About an hour after Charley began to sketch, Mr. Stockbridge arrived in the class room. By the intimidated Mr. Jessups he stood, regarding the students. Across his chest his arms were folded, as Captain Kidd might have postured while waiting for his victim to walk the plank; only Mr. Stockbridge was in evening dress. His mustaches were intensely and provokingly black and belligerent. The attitude of his broad-brimmed gray hat was an insult. The profusion of black curls, the taunting lift of his head, the casual bluster of his shoulders, all implied sway and dominion; the authentic gesture of the buccaneer.

He was considered the school's best advertisement. There had been rumors that he was a pirate in virtue, and that he accepted small graft, but these had been hushed up. They would be! He was so picturesque, was Mr. Stockbridge; he added such a tone to the school.

Stalking imposingly from one portfolio to another, Mr. Stockbridge paused for but few comments; it was said that in two words he could express what other instructors required ten minutes to convey. Two students he ousted as hopeless. His progress down the class was rapid, and unquestioned.

“Mr. Gaunt! That gives me the creeps!”

Helen Saylor was looking over his shoulder, where his

hand worked upon the interpretation of muscle and curve and ligament; an explication of the secret of the soul as it is contained in flesh; an *eclaircissement*, attempted and now almost an accomplishment.

What had he done with it? Helen could not estimate intelligibly to herself. It gave her the creeps! And what is the thing that has always given women the creeps?

The coiling shape he had drawn was implicitly feminine. Every line of it fairly seemed to sing with seduction; a human body calling upon ravishment. Muscle and curve and ligament were as one voice, crooning passionately; thighs and torso were an importunate invitation. The summons and desire of warm flesh were in them all.

Yet what a mockery it was! What an intense and friendless revelation! The face of the creature he depicted was lovely in feature; exquisite in proportion, yet in its features, and in every line and muscle and curve and ligament there was something present of the unguessable principle; something that made an hour's sketch almost move with life itself; something cheap and damnable.

What it was Helen did not know. It gave her the creeps.

Mr. Jason Stockbridge had almost completed his tour of inspection. A promising class! Only two students rejected! Presently he would be done with all this; there was a girl waiting for him somewhere; he would go to her with his conscience at peace.

At Charley's chair, Mr. Stockbridge came to a halt. Seven feet high, he towered over the sketch of the red-haired youth, so intensely concentrated upon his occupation that he did not feel the presence of seven feet of Mr. Stockbridge.

Across his chest Mr. Stockbridge folded his mighty arms; his mustaches seemed to be blacker and more belligerent; his head shook, and the black curls trembled; the wide brimmed gray hat increased the sneer of its attitude.

"What is that you are trying to do, young man?" asked Mr. Stockbridge, in a tone dangerously suave, bland and magniloquent.

Charley drew a significant line between the lips.

"This is a fancy," he said buoyantly; "the fancy of discovered fact. This is the temple of Aphrodite, now inhabited by a hag, since Aphrodite is dead and at the bottom of the sea!"

"What is that? What is that you are saying, young man?"

Charley grinned at him.

"In my town," he said, "there are fine old houses, but the old families are fled. Negroes live in them now. It is the same with girls like that—white bodies but black souls!"

Mr. Stockbridge frowned ominously. The muscles and curves and ligaments of his face moved in disapproving bluster.

"Young man," he said blandiloquently, "this is not a place for freakish experiments, or the indulgence of boyish eccentricities. This is a class to study the human body. I think you belong in the antique class. Hands, sir! Especially the human hand. The very first thing to acquire, young man. As for that atrocity——"

He reached over and took up a pencil. With emphatic swings of his hand back and forth across the paper, he ruined the sketch with angry, jagged lines, criss cross and tormenting and full of malice.

Charley glared upon it, but only for an instant. Then he turned and looked upon Mr. Jason Stockbridge. Not a symbol of the seven feet escaped him. Muscle and curve and ligament was there in the face, and bulging under evening attire, to be read by the initiated brothers of the Living God.

Angry, jagged lines, criss cross and tormenting and full of malice! What could be reclaimed from them? One stroke here! Quickly! The winged monster of riven stone turns

its lidless eyes upon you. Stammer and hesitate upon your peril! Read the riddle quickly of muscle and curve and ligament, emphatic with bluster.

The dangerous prize is her kiss!

A stroke here! A stroke there! A chamois cloth to obliterate this! A new curve rounded here.

Helen sees. Helen sees what the red-haired mysterious man is about! He is making a face out of a figure, crossed with criss cross lines, tormenting and full of malice. See how malice and torment may be made to serve the friendless purposes of revelation!

New lines and old lines, intermingling and redrawn. A broad-brimmed hat over the hair, made into curls by hideous, quick little strokes. Angry lines already drawn are mustaches now, black and belligerent. The woman's buttocks are become his lips.

See! Let our brother Gods laugh hilariously together at what we are doing here! Helen sees, and with a scream of laughter holds up the picture so that all the class may behold the thing the dreamer has done.

Cruel and tormenting satire! Cruel and tormenting laughter shrieking from a hundred throats. Turn away, mild Mr. Jessups, lest you, too, laugh a hollow and authoritative laugh. Roar and stamp, you pirate, for here you are! Here is your soul, drawn in muscle and curve and ligament. Here is your character in lines of charcoal, stark, denuded, stripped of pretense, imposture, sham. Here is the rapine you hide under your clothes! Here is the graft that has crossed your fat palms! Here is your bluster naked!

Naked!

Roar and shout and shriek, wild, belligerent, revengeful laughter! The class was unloosed with mirth. Chairs were overturned; drawings spilled upon the floor; the model crept

on bare, noiseless feet to join the throng and see that amazing caricature.

Around the red-haired, pale-faced man they eddied, deafening his ears with their laughter. There had never been such a caricature! How had the fellow done it? A hundred tongues were babbling, but none answered the question. The truth was slyly hidden somewhere in muscle and curve and ligament, and some of the lines had been drawn by Stockbridge himself.

The lidless eyes of the winged monster settled in an amused stare upon the traveler. Here was a stranger, ready with his answer. The creature wet its lips with its tongue. The dangerous prize is her kiss.

Charley found himself on the sidewalk outside. He was bewildered. The class had been dismissed. Stockbridge had revoked his application. He would not, could not, nor did he care to, study at the Young Artists Association again.

Some one touched him on the arm. It was Helen Saylor. He looked down into her eyes curiously.

"Oh, Mr. Gaunt," she quavered, "I don't know whether to be sad or glad! It was all my fault. I tormented you into drawing that picture. And it did give me the creeps. I—I think you're wonderful, Mr. Gaunt. Please don't speak. I—I never saw such an uncanny thing in my life. And that picture of poor Mr. Stockbridge! He's just furious—but it was him, every line of it was him. Mr. Gaunt, you're going to be famous. Everybody up there is talking about you. I know what I'm going to do! I owe it to you to do something and I'm going to speak to——"

"You owe me nothing," he said.

"But I shall do it!" she declared, her eyes brightening as one conscious of her own power over some one. "You will never regret having made that funny picture, Mr. Gaunt.

Tell me! Won't you lunch with me tomorrow at the Onandaga?"

He liked her eyes. And for the first time since he had come to New York he was lonely. Those primitive forces within him were at their old struggle already.

"Yes," he said. "I should like to!"

"Then be there at one o'clock! The check is on me—the modern girl thing, you know. Good night and *au revoir*, strange and handsome Peter Gaunt!"

Alone! Alone, in the shadow of the crashing elevated; of steep towers and gaunt, blear buildings; a battle in his soul, and a hunger in his heart.

That hunger touched him with a remembrance, and aroused a grotesque purpose.

A smile! A red smile, rich with tenderness and something else elusive and unreachable.

He fumbled in his vest pocket. The struggle within him was waging, fierce and strong. Yes! There it was! Her name and her address.

Melodie! The cheaply dressed girl with the rich smile!

The hour was less than ten. He would not return to his attic room in Pomander Walk so soon.

He would seek out Melodie!

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

GOD HELP US, HURRY!

AND why to Melodie?

Through Charley Turner's mind the impulse to find the cheaply dressed girl with the rich smile was blowing like a clean wind. The effect was keen and bracing. There had been in his thoughts a fog, an incoherence now pleasantly dissolving.

Gayly he set off toward Broadway. His feet felt as if they had wings. On his lips bubbled an old song. As he swung into the long street of lights, he laughed softly.

It did not occur to him to wonder at himself. If it had been a night of excitement, of madness even, perhaps there was more madness yet to be. He liked that. Had he paused to wonder upon anything, it would have been the majestic approval deep within him; the peace of an inner benediction.

Practical questions tried to intrude themselves upon his excellent humor. Had he not, in the midst of his first session in the life class, been thrown out of the school?

"I should probably be thrown out of any school," he told himself. "It is the way of schools with men like me!"

How, then, was he to acquire the art to give his visions utterance? To what would he turn now, on the rocky island of dreams?

His self-communing smile dismissed these idle riddles. He had heard the piper's tune of whim and impulse, and he had no time to cross-examine. On he hurried to Melodie.

As he came from under the shadows of the elevated at Fifty-third Street, a huge hand, made of electric lights, opened and closed before his eyes. It was displayed upon the top of a theater; an advertisement for a popular brand of cigarettes.

Hands!

For a moment, the song fled from his mouth. The fog clouded in his thoughts. The madness of those moments in the life class returned; the madness that heated his fingers as he drew the wild figure on his paper; a sweet and glowing intoxication of the regal mystery within.

Hands!

Stockbridge had invited him into the antique class, that he might learn to sketch hands. Dead hands! Plaster hands! Were there not thousands of draughtsmen who could draw hands for Stockbridge? And why, indeed, should they or any one else draw dead hands, when so many had already been drawn?

And who had drawn a hand with a soul? He should have asked Stockbridge that. There was no soul in a plaster hand. He smiled surely.

“When Jesus fed his twelve in the upper room,” he murmured, “—white bread with red wine he gave them—what was it he said? The hand of his betrayer lay upon the table. That was what Jesus said. Jesus had seen the hand, then? Had he not seen the soul of the hand! Ah, there was a hand worth drawing, Stockbridge! One wouldn’t find its model in a plaster cast! Find the artist who can paint the hand of Judas!”

Again he smiled, even more surely.

“These painters and sketchers of plaster hands,” he muttered, “grow to have plaster hands themselves. They would not recognize the hand of Judas, not if they touched its moist palm and shriveled fingers!”

He was passing a theater. Framed on its walls were orna-

mental sketches of show girls. One of them resembled Melodie. Seeing it, he hastened; and he sang again, and the whimsical breeze in his mind blew away the mists of speculation.

In the Times Square hubbub, Charley was forced to slacken his steps, but his mood remained impervious among these perfumed masses. The nearer he approached to Melodie's house, the happier he found himself, and the more coherent his intention became.

He was blind to the dancing gargoyles, posturing in electric leaps and bends upon the roof of the Hotel Astor; blind, to the millions of blinking electric bulbs, red, green, yellow, blue, pink, orange, and purple. He was deaf to the shrieking of the auto horns; the gabble of ten thousand tongues in all their various jargons; the clamor and the riot of the Forties. Let Broadway shudder in its garish incoherence; he was at peace with a purpose that was growing in intelligence.

The nude model had something to do with his search for Melodie. When he had first looked upon her, a cold frenzy danced in his pulses; he had seemed to interpret her soul in that one shocked glance. He had known her to be the naked expression of all that disappointed him in women. Warmed with wonder at her body; frozen with pity at her soul!

Out of what occult penetration had he perceived that? He could not surmise. But now he knew that he was seeking Melodie because, in her cheapness and her richness, he had once perceived, present and alive, all the nude model had lacked.

He stood at the corner of Broadway and the street on which she lived. A doubt arose in his mind. Had she cheated him? How could any one live here, in the very heart of incoherent Broadway?

Again he looked at her card. The address was written plainly, and after it, a mischievous line: "Just forty-five seconds from Broadway."

He stared down the darkened street. It was but one block; at the farther end the stark piers of the Sixth Avenue elevated crossed in mid-air. Beyond that was a green park, lighted with mild white lamps.

Cheap little stores and restaurants lined the street on the southern side. Opposite, midway in the block, an immense office building towered into the night sky. Between him and this office building there remained a stretch of shabby wooden houses. Perhaps Melodie lived in one of them.

He walked eastward until he stood opposite the first of the wooden houses. Its ancient clapboards were painted a bright yellow. A swinging sign, creaking in the wind, announced that here was an old-fashioned English tea room. Above it, the wall had been torn out, to make a show window for a theatrical boot shop.

Pleased, he walked on. These absurd little houses were admirable. In this shouting region of dancing gargoyles, of concrete, brick and steel, they were astonishing incongruities. To Charley, they were like poor, but self-respecting old women, these houses; the very paint on their old boards was dried like withered skin. No flowers bloomed in the railed-in garden spaces; all the houses were given over to shops of one kind or another, and in front of them was displayed the wares of one concern; a rambling collection of rusted ironmongery. Tongs and shovels and pokers and andirons; fireplace fittings, swinging lanterns; post-lights and ornaments of wrought metal, fashioned by patient hands, were sprawled in bewildering exhibition.

The last house nestled close to the wall of the office building. Its basement had a shop-window, in which a small painting in oil was offered for sale. A dim light was burn-

ing in the room, and Charley could see an old man, seated in a rocking chair, smoking a pipe and reading a book.

For the last time Charley consulted the card. This was the house where Melodie lived; forty-five seconds from Broadway.

Would Melodie be glad to see him? What would he say to her? How could he explain his calling upon her, at half-past ten in the evening? He smiled, remembering that down in Baltimore most of his people were asleep. Here, on the island of dreams, one called when one wanted to.

Passing the shop window, he went down a short flight of wooden steps, and knocked at the door. Presently he heard the shuffle of feet, and the voice of the old man, calling upon a dog to be quiet. Then the door opened, and the old man thrust his face out toward Charley.

"Well?" he asked sharply.

"Is Melodie at home?"

"Is what?"

The old man stepped out into the vestibule, and, turning his face sideways, exposed his ear, as if that were a key to his head and he wished Charley to turn it with his teeth.

"I am looking for a young woman by the name of Melodie," repeated Charley.

"Bill collector?" snapped the old man, with a savage hunching forward of one shoulder.

"No! A friend!"

"Friend! Friend indeed! Another friend! There's a lot of friends been coming around here since she's got her job. Where were you all during her trouble? That's what I want to know. I was the only friend she had then. No, she's not home. I don't know when she'll be home!"

The contemptuous indifference of the old man was emphasized by a liberal expectoration.

"I shall be here to see her again," said Charley patiently.

"Would you mind saying to her that Mr. Peter Gaunt called—the man she met on the train?"

The old man was backing triumphantly through the door, but at Charley's words, he paused, with a low exclamation.

"Are you the man who bought her those sandwiches?" he asked.

Charley smiled.

"God forgive me for an old fool, sir! *She'll* never forgive me, if she finds out about this. The way that girl talks about you, Mr. Gaunt, you'd think it was a case of love at first sight. Won't you please come in, Mr. Gaunt, and let me make amends?"

He continued to mutter imprecations upon his own stupidity as he led Charley into an old-fashioned room, filled with fragrant tobacco smoke. After indicating a comfortable rocking chair, with a gallant sweep of his hand, he produced a thick stone jug from which he poured two glasses of yellow wine.

"To Melodie, sir!" he proposed, holding up his glass, and together they downed the toast.

"You are a real friend of Melodie," was Charley's comment.

"I am that, sir. Do you know, Mr. Gaunt, I think Melodie would never forgive me if she knew how I treated you?"

"Then don't tell her!" advised Charley. "It shall be our secret. Do you think she will be here soon?"

"Haven't you been reading about her in the papers?" asked the old man sharply.

"No, Mr.——"

"Watts! Alexander Watts," supplied the old man, readily.

"No, Mr. Watts. Has Melodie been getting herself into the papers?"

Mr. Watts nodded solemnly, as he sought for matches. Finding his pockets empty, he excused himself and left the room. Glancing around the room, Charley noted the many

oils and water colors displayed on the mantel and against the walls.

"Are you an artist, Mr. Watts?" he inquired, when the old man returned, puffing on his pipe.

"I'm a dead artist, Mr. Gaunt," he replied quietly. "Do you know what a dead artist means? It means a living fool! This city is full of animated corpses of artists. We come here, determined to paint the most wonderful pictures in the world. And then something happens to us. God help us, I suppose it's the town. No! I don't try any more. I sell pictures for artists who haven't quite died yet. The altogether dead artists won't do business with me; they sell on Fifth Avenue!"

He laughed slowly. Charley smiled in understanding sympathy. He liked Mr. Alexander Watts all the more because of the certain heartbreak hidden beneath his bitter jesting. He might himself have died this very night if he had gone into the antique class.

"You started to tell me about Melodie's getting into the newspapers," suggested Charley.

"God help us, Mr. Gaunt! She's on the stage at last. And to think you hadn't heard. Why, she has Broadway by the nose!"

"That is splendid news!" agreed Charley, touched at the old man's earnest enthusiasm. "She said something to me about having tried, but they all said she wasn't good——"

"God help us all, Mr. Gaunt! *I* knew better. They all told her she wasn't good enough except her friend, Alexander Watts. I knew better. I knew there was something wonderful about that little girl. Only it took eyes like mine to see it. She fools people, Mr. Gaunt. They think she hasn't much education—and she hasn't. But she's got everything about else in the world. Everything! Mind? She's smart as steel. Body? The first time I ever saw her—she was a model, then,

for one of my artists—I just gasped! She's—she's just beautiful, Mr. Gaunt!"

"And she has a soul," murmured Charley.

"Has she?" shouted the old man, rising and gesticulating with his pipe. "Has she a soul, Mr. Gaunt? God help us!"

He came over to Charley's chair and put his hand on Charley's shoulder.

"You don't know that little girl," he said. "I guess they wouldn't speak to her down in the town where she was born. But what does that matter? When she was hungry, she had to eat, didn't she? And if she couldn't get work, what was she to do? Well! She did it. She did what many another girl has done before her! That poor fellow of hers, dying of tuberculosis out West—where do you suppose she would have got the money to keep him on earth, if she hadn't done what she did? God help us, she's a mystery! There she was! Full of trouble, if ever anybody had trouble in this world. Double trouble, every day of her life. I haven't told you the worst of her trouble, Mr. Gaunt. She wouldn't like it, perhaps, so I won't. But she smiled through it all—that sweet smile that hasn't a duplicate in the world!"

"You've noticed it, too?" said Charley.

"Noticed it? God help us, Mr. Gaunt! It cut me to the heart. When she was sick I nursed her as if she was my own daughter—and I've never even had a wife. She will smile on judgment day. And you didn't know the good news?"

Charley smiled and shook his head.

"There's only one thing to do!" declared Mr. Watts, rising in sudden excitement. "Just a minute."

From his pocket he drew a large, tarnished watch. Clucking his lips in satisfaction, he began a new search through his pockets and finally produced a pink slip of paper.

"This is a door pass to the theater," he said hurriedly. "It will take you in. She gave it to me, but I've seen it four times already, and besides I can get another one. She goes

on in just twenty minutes; just at the close of the show. Hurry up, and you can see her—and then you can pick her up at the stage door and bring her here. I'll be waiting for you! Hurry, now!"

"Where is it?" asked Charley excitedly. In the old man's enthusiasm there was a contagion which warmed him.

"Summer Garden!" cried Mr. Watts. "Hurry, now! She's got Broadway by the nose. It's the most wonderful thing in the world. Better take a cab. You don't want to miss any of it!"

Babbling and chuckling, the old man led Charley to the street. Though he was bent and coatless, he insisted on going to the corner of Broadway and calling a taxi.

"Take this gentleman to the Summer Garden," he told the chauffeur sonorously. "And God help us, hurry!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

VENUS WAS NOT DEAD!

THEY said on Broadway that the new Summer Garden show was a knockout. It was the year in which nudity was put on parade—and the Summer Garden was in the vanguard of Fashion, as always.

The lyrics and music were by Al Brookville; the dialogue was by Hobart Glynn; Eddie Lane had staged the dances; the designs were by M. Sutre; the ballet was under the direction of Rabitzoff, and the whole performance was under the personal supervision of Messrs. Abe and Aaron Coyne, the producers.

Charley Turner arrived at the brilliant entrance to the theater at the hour when the *revue* was racing jazzily to its startling finale. His mind was caught with a high curiosity. In a few moments he was to see Melodie again! But under what surprising conditions! What would she do?

The pink ticket he presented at the door gained him admission. At the rear of the aisles, men and women were standing, three deep; the vast theater was crowded. As he sought a place, the music was playing a jiggling melody, and two thin young men in evening clothes were pacing through eccentric steps before a silver curtain. A shattering salvo of applause rewarded them as Charley halted at the head of an aisle; a forbidden spot, from which he could see the stage perfectly.

The smirking young dancers appeared and reappeared, bowing grotesquely, until the lights went out and the orchestra began a low, beguiling prelude.

Then the silver curtain lifted in the final episode of the entertainment.

As the stage was fully revealed, Charley strained his eyes, and filled with a baffled sense of disappointment. He saw that there now hung between the spectators and the players a curtain of transparent gauze. In the center was an oval pool of blue water, girdled with a marble curb, and from this pool of blue water a slender fountain of spray leaped and fell impetuously. A great company of young women reclined about the pool in idle postures of graceful indolence. Over all the scene brooded a trembling silver light.

Beautiful, as a scene on the stage may well be beautiful. But where was Melodie? Was she one of those shadowy young women, reclining around the marble girdle of the pool? Was this what the old man had bidden him here to see?

They were singing, those indolent young women; between closed teeth they were singing a low-hummed music. Yearning, and the entreaty of warm ardor was in the cadence of their young voices. Slowly the Lydian measures swelled, their tender pleading mounting until at last the chorus seemed to burst forth sweetly in a wild dithyramb of passion; an exorcism, crying out to love.

To Charley, it seemed his heart was singing with them, crying out to Melodie.

The fountain trembled in the silver light. They were singing the song of love again, those indolent young women by the marble basin of blue water. As if the fountain had heard the song, and was touched by its pleading, the slender spiral of spray rose higher, trembling and growing with the music. Its impetuous falling and leaping was a very dance of passion, lambent, undulating, and responsive.

And now something was stirring and alive in the dancing water, called and cried out for, exorcised out of the cool blue quiet of the pool.

Something alive and warm was appearing within the silver spiral of passionate spray; something rising, higher and still higher with each responsive leap and undulation.

A woman! A woman nude and alive! A woman from the water, rising in rhythm with the dance of spray and the song of the sweet young voices. Higher! Higher yet! One more adventurous leap of the ardent fountain; one last thrilling cry in the song of the young woman, and the figure is free. Poised there, with the foamy lace upon her fair young form, she was volant in the air, the resurrection of beauty out of death, altogether lovely.

Beautiful and astonishing Melodie!

The heart of the dreamer looked out of his eyes.

He groped his way out of the theater, as the curtain swiftly descended and the emerging crowd engulfed him.

He was awed. This girl, upon whose nude beauty he had gazed through the curtain of transparent gauze, was the same girl with whom he had ridden through the dark of a memorable night. She had told him then she was no better than she should be.

Yet over his heart she had flung a spell of amazement. He had read the richness of her wonder in her smile; he had witnessed the revelation of her beauty, eloquent in muscle and curve and ligament. Where was the cheapness vanished to? Why was this so different a spectacle to the model on the pedestal of the life class?

White body and shining soul?

Was this an illusion, conjured up by the sorcery of his fancy? Or had he occult eyes to know what it was he had beheld? The old man had said one must have eyes to see these mysteries.

Suddenly he laughed aloud. He shook with the mirth of a giant; his muscles shivered with his prodigious laughter.

God, what a comedian You are!

Here, in the Summer Garden of Broadway, had come to

pass the most staggering and the most amusing of all the miracles. Messrs. Abe and Aaron Coyne had personally supervised for him the production of the risen wonder of Aphrodite, lifted and living, out of the sea.

Venus was not dead, after all. The wise old lunatics were not mistaken. Was it possible they had known the amazing truth from the beginning? Had they suspected he would learn some day where to search? In their insane wisdom, had they understood the appalling jest?

Venus was not dead. Venus had been expelled from respectable society. Venus had gone on the town. Immortal Aphrodite had found her dwelling place at last in the soul of the prostitute.

Who but a madman could find that out?

Not until the dark of early morning, as he sat at the open window, looking down upon the little gardens of Pomander Walk, did he remember.

He was to have looked for Melodie at the stage door. The old man had promised to be waiting for them.

He decided it was preferable that he had forgotten. For one night in New York, the cup of experience was filled. Now the piper's tune in his soul called him to solitude and dreaming. He could not think. He could only feel, inhaling gratefully of the lush night fragrance; the healing smell of little pines and cedars in the gardens, and the drifting perfume of the roses.

A great fog of doubt was cleared away. Venus was not dead! Somehow he would learn to paint the picture of Woman for which God had waited so long. And Melodie would be its model and its inspiration.

Only he knew the last mystery was still hidden from him—the enigmatic mystery of her smile.

Enough now! It had been a tremendous evening on the rocky island of his dreams.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

BEHIND THE RED CORD

WHEN Helen Saylor said good night to the red-haired young man who had created such excitement in the life class, she still held in her hand his caricature of Mr. Stockbridge.

The red-haired young Peter Gaunt filled her thoughts. She considered him handsome, poetic and mysterious; a new and surprising type. Helen pursued new and surprising types of manhood with the zeal of a collector, but most of her surprises had been disappointments.

She was defiantly feminine in her modernism; she was a member of the Woman Peace Club, and an evangelist of the free love gospel, who occasionally practiced its doctrines. Up in Schenectady, where she was born, her folks worried about her. She knew everybody she wanted to know and was invited wherever she wanted to go.

When she first arrived in New York she tried verses, but after an amourette with a Greenwich Village poet, she conceived a dislike for metrical expression. For the next two years she ran a tea-room on Seventy-second Street, and this season she was taking up drawing in a serious way.

In her reading she had learned a great deal about sex. One did in her set. She was able to quote extensively from the *Satyricon* of Petronius; she possessed a handsome volume of Smith's *Poetica Erotica*; she had read all of the Havelock Ellis Studies in the Psychology of Sex; she knew the Memoirs of Fanny Hill, and she had memorized in the original German the thirty-two positions of Aretino.

Somehow, life was proving a disappointment to Helen, and each new and surprising type of man she found held the promise of restored illusion. In young Mr. Peter Gaunt she had seen such a promise.

Now, as Helen waited for a Fifth Avenue bus that would take her to her studio apartment on Twelfth Street, an idea suddenly occurred to her; a whimsical purpose that brought a smile of amusement to her lips. While she dallied with the idea, she permitted two buses to rumble past. The more she thought upon it, the happier and more practical the plan appeared. She glanced at her wrist watch. It was growing late, but there might yet be time.

After all, why not? The question answered itself. There was no reason, really, why she shouldn't, and it might be the making of young Mr. Peter Gaunt.

The Hotel Plaza was nearby. From one of its telephones, five minutes later, Helen was in cordial and animated conversation with Tony Durand, the satirical columnist of the morning *Sphere*. Tony was one of her new and surprising types who had proved a severe disappointment, but they were still good friends. Tony had met a severe disappointment himself in a later episode. He had encouraged a chaste and beautiful little Western blonde to write sonnets, but at a crucial moment Mr. Jason Stockbridge had blustered into the affair and carried off the chaste and beautiful blonde on his arm. Helen was counting on that.

Her voice bright with enthusiasm, she told Tony the story of what a young and handsome red-haired stranger had done to Mr. Jason Stockbridge that very night in the life class. To all of it Tony listened in utter silence; a remarkable indication of his interest.

"You get in a cab and come right down here with that picture," said Tony, at the close of Helen's story. "I'll stay up half the night to get a cut made of the thing, and I'll write half a column about it to lead my stuff to-morrow morning.

God kiss you, Helen, for a kind, good child. I knew the day would come when I would get Mr. Jason Stockbridge."

It is high noon in the West Forties; the luncheon hour at the Onandaga.

Across the doorway of its favorite dining room a red cord swings. Only to admit those who have answered readily and without stammering the riddle of the young sphinx may the red cord be lifted. To those whose tongues were tied, to those who hesitated or deliberated, the red cord swings and bars the way.

The red cord is said to divide the sheep from the goats, but who are the sheep and who are the goats is a matter of several opinions.

Beyond the red cord are spread silver and napery, food and drink, tables and chairs, and against the walls, long benches upholstered in green velour. It is a crowded dining room, for the name of those who have answered the riddle promptly, without stammering, without taking undue counsel of conscience, is legion. The air is filled with drifting smoke, and the babble of red and clever tongues. Upon the hour of high noon, the babble is without pause; it is a low, incessant murmur, pitched within a sinister octave, sonorous with favorite chords.

Gold and sex! Cash and concupiscence! Money and woman.

Of these subjects the red and clever tongues babble without pause. And whose tongues are these that babble here at high noon in the West Forties; whose are these red and clever tongues that murmur insistently, so insistently of sex and gold, of cash and concupiscence, of money and woman?

Here are the hireling dreamers. Here gather the visionaries who have accepted harness and oats. Here assemble and dissemble the paid favorites of the young sphinx; dreamers who have taken its kiss and found its breath fatal as the basilisk.

And of what they whisper, the sex is sham sex and the gold is brass.

They know everything now and believe nothing any more. They know that religion is a perverted sexual hysteria. They do not believe there is a God. They know that there is Lesbianism in Long Island. They do not believe there is a pure love of one man and one woman anywhere. They are the wisest company in the world; the best customers for intellectual gold-bricks in history.

Of the countless other little dining rooms with red cords of their own kind, this is the most pompous, the most swagger, the most blatant.

Babble! Babble! Babble! And in the shrill music of the babble there is a bass clef of pathos. Listen well and you shall surely hear its melancholy.

For while they speak of woman and gold, their hearts are mourning another thing altogether. This is a dining room, crowded with Josephs from the hinterland hills; Josephs who know that every flower they pluck now grew on the grave of a buried dream.

Here are the Josephs who dared not flee the harlot. Her hands seized their cloaks; her lips called them with red enticement; they might have fled and left the coat of many colors in her hand.

They remained.

Of their imperial master they made a cuckold. They pillow'd their heads on the breast of the harlot. And now here they sit at luncheon, babbling in a red chord, careless of the prices on the menu, the prosperous favorites of a very vulgar mistress.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

CHARLEY DRAWS A PICTURE

IT was high noon in the West Forties; luncheon hour at the Onandaga, and around one of its famous tables a group of Helen Saylor's friends babbled heartily.

"Everybody is talking about it," Miriam Shaw was saying. She poured herself a generous three-fingers of Scotch from a silver flask. "Helen has been calling up every one she knows. I wouldn't be surprised if she waltzed in here any moment with the man. Well, for one, I'm glad it happened. Stockbridge had it coming to him, I say, and it *was* a God-awful funny picture."

She drank the liquor at a practiced gulp. Miriam was the best stage interviewer in New York, and was to be relied upon to tell you the worst about any theater star after her third drink. No popular magazine was complete without her impressions of some beauty or hero 'of the stage. Once she had written verse; shy lines with sparks that promised some day to come to flame. But her tastes were expensive; the interviews were profitable, and Miriam put away her poetry.

"I suppose he is Helen's latest sensation," said Magda Marlowe Mather, the dramatist. "Last year it was an athlete. To-day it is a cartoonist. To-morrow she'll be after my husband, I suppose!"

"Want him taken off your hands?" asked Dangerfield Masters, the poet of passion.

"No. Not that," replied Magda, filling her own glass

languidly. "But I want him to get back to women around my own age. He's showing too active an interest in flappers these days; everybody says the flappers are going out, and I hope they go quick. I'd rather have him flirt with women my own age."

Magda was a success in art and matrimony. The critics said her plays were authentic, which was due, probably, to their being sterile of hope. She had a camera soul, recording life through astigmatic lenses, and her pictures were shadowed with a somber incredulity. Once she had danced, and when she was a little girl she believed in a wishing ring. Then she married a manufacturer and became involved in dramatic photography.

"What are you all talking about?" asked Sonya Bellaire, the editor of a sophisticated story book. She had been admiring the broad shoulders of a waiter.

"Good Lord, Sonya," protested Dangerfield Masters. "Do you mean to say you haven't heard about the roast Tony gave Stockbridge in his column this morning?"

Masters was a poet of young passion, high in the favor of fashionable society on Long Island; a man with never enough money to live on, who was invited into the best drawing rooms. Of Masters it was said that for a new suit of clothes he would introduce any one into the red plush and velvet circles.

"No," said Sonya to Masters, making coaxing motions with her fingers toward him for a cigarette, "What is it all about?"

"Well," said Masters, rather put down at such ignorance, "you did know, didn't you, that Stockbridge stole the Maitland girl right under Tony's nose, didn't you know that, Sonya?"

"I knew it in advance. I warned Tony," boasted Sonya, blowing a wreath of smoke contemptuously from her lips. "Go on, Masters; you try to be too damned dramatic."

"Well," interposed Miriam comfortably, pouring another drink, "Tony's even now!"

"You see, Sonya," continued Masters, giving her an offended glance, "there was a jolly row up at the life class last night. Some red-headed young beggar——"

"Helen would like *that*," put in Miriam.

"Some red-headed young beggar," insisted Masters, "that nobody ever heard of before, joined the class and on his first night there drew a sketch that Stockbridge didn't like. So Stockbridge expressed his disapproval by crossing the sketch all over with charcoal. Well! The boy—Peter Gaunt, of all names on earth—the boy didn't like *that*. What did he do but turn around and by a perfectly ungodly skill, made a caricature of Stockbridge out of the ruined sketch. Clever, what? It was a devilish thing; Stockbridge could never deny the likeness. Helen Saylor got mixed up in the thing, somehow; that's awfully Helen Saylor, you know, and so Tony carried a vivid account of the affair in his column this morning, and published the caricature right at the top! He took the trouble to say, Sonya, that the young beggar was a genius at cartooning. You know what that means!"

"I wish he would say I was a genius," said Magda. "I wonder if our red-headed young friend appreciates it. Tony Durand has made more than one reputation with a line like that. He's in luck!"

It suddenly dawned upon the company that they were neglecting one of their most distinguished companions. All during their babble, Mr. Gensler—Mr. Herman Gensler, publisher—had quietly been devouring chicken sandwiches on toasted bread. It was Gensler's way to be quiet. He was a millionaire who always knew what the public wanted. Some portions of the public knew, or thought they knew, what Gensler wanted.

It was rumored that he wanted Helen Saylor.

"Did you know about it, Mr. Gensler?" asked Masters, turning suavely toward the publisher.

"I knew all about it," announced Gensler. "Miss Saylor telephoned me this morning. She says the boy *is* a genius, but one funny picture don't make a cartoonist in my office. Miss Saylor wants me to give him a chance. Well, maybe I will. Who can tell?"

"Good Lord," gasped Dangerfield Masters. "There they are now!"

As it happened, Helen Saylor was following a waiter across the dining room, and behind her walked a red-haired young man with bold blue eyes.

With a bow, the waiter gave them a table where they would be watched by all the dining room.

"Do you know," asked Helen lightly, "that you are an object of the most excited interest to everybody here?"

He glanced skeptically over the dining room, then flushed red as his hair. It was true. Eyes were turned toward him everywhere. Never before had he been an object of interest; there was a thrill in him.

"Why are they so interested in me?" he asked in bewilderment.

Helen had known, ten minutes before, that he had not seen his sketch in the *Sphere*.

"I have let them know you are a new genius that I have discovered," she replied, in light evasion.

He flushed again.

"Why do you say that?" he asked quickly.

"Because you *are* a genius," insisted Helen, looking at him with her intense eyes. "I knew it when I saw you draw that picture last night. You are going to be famous!"

Muscle and curve and ligament! Thigh and torso and the white swell of unmilked breasts! Was she jesting with him? Or had there been a fire in his strokes; a blaze in his lines?

"Is every one here famous?" he asked.

"Not all! But they all belong, if you know what I mean," replied Helen, taking up the menu card. After they had ordered, Charley returned to his question.

"But they are all dreamers?" he persisted. "They are all doing their work; the work they love to do?"

"They are all living their own lives, if that is what you mean," was Helen's reply.

"That is what I do mean," he agreed enthusiastically. "That is the wonderful thing here. People live their own lives. They are free to express beauty as they see it. It was good of you to let me come!"

She smiled at him, something maternal and tender coming into her eyes.

"Where did you come from, Peter?" she asked.

"What does that matter?" he countered quickly. "I had to be born somewhere. I am being re-born in New York. I am only a few weeks old!"

She laughed.

"I love you for that, Peter," she told him.

She would have said more, but they were interrupted by the approach of a short, well-groomed youth, who ran his hand through his brown curls and then extended it buoyantly toward Helen.

"My dear," he said easily, "the sight of you made me so hungry I had to come over and speak to you."

"Peter," said Helen, "I want you to know this boy. He might be a genius; I haven't decided yet. He is Mr. Emmanuel Cross, and he is only nineteen years old, and he's married, and he's a poet. If you don't stop him, he'll tell you that Goodley's magazine published two or three of his little things with double page decorations by Harry Larnwood. He will have a book in the fall. Mannie, this is Mr. Peter Gaunt!"

"I've been hearing about you, Gaunt," said Mannie, shaking

hands effusively. "From what every one says, you are going to be heard from a great deal before you get through."

"I don't understand," said Charley. "But I shall certainly look for your book."

"I'll see that you get a copy," promised Mannie happily. "Why don't you and Helen run up to our country place for a week-end? Mrs. Cross would be delighted to have you; the sky's the limit up at our place; you can do whatever you darn please."

"What do you generally darn please?" asked Charley, amazed at the young poet's idiom.

"Oh!" Mannie ran his hand through his dark curls once more. "We have enough hootch to last out the summer, and we have a lake! Helen knows!"

"Mannie!" protested Helen, annoyed.

"Nude bathing parties!" confided Mannie elaborately. "Every midnight when we have guests."

"May I ask, Mr. Cross, why you have nude bathing parties?" asked Charley sharply.

"Mannie, I wish you had stayed where you were," said Helen.

"Oh, Gaunt, now don't be naïve. After three or four hours of hootch and dancing, there's a real kick in it, you know!"

Charley grinned quietly at the young man. There was a moment of silence.

"Well," said Mannie, "my lady friend will be wondering where her young swain has flown. Glad to have met you, Gaunt. Remember—you and Helen come up!"

He shook hands solemnly with Charley, and sauntered away.

"Peter," said Helen, "were you shocked by that little fool?"

"Not after I discovered he was not a poet," replied Charley.

"Oh, but he is, Peter. He writes beautiful sonnets."

"He is not a poet. While he was speaking, I saw a picture

of what he was speaking about. A party of drunken men and women, belching probably, with their bellies protruding, their flabby muscles sagging on their bones, splashing about in the wet blue of a midnight pool! Can't you see? If he had only told me of the lake, and the gray-green shadows of the old trees! Perhaps one nude girl, lonely and shy, bathing under a lemon moon! I would crawl to his lake on bloody knees to see that, you understand?"

Helen smiled. But she was thinking, "You *are* only three weeks old, Peter!"

"Mannie has been drinking," Helen said, after a pause. "Of course, every one doesn't follow the example of his set. But that is the way some people insist on living nowadays."

It was just as well that his education be taken promptly in hand.

"Haven't you ever read of the freedom of the creative life; what used to be called the freedom of Bohemia? After all, they have a right to live their own lives; you did approve of that. The old conventions are breaking down, Peter; the process has been going on since the nineties."

Charley leaned forward, suddenly earnest.

"I have read of the freedom of Bohemia," he admitted. "But I have always regarded taste as the title deed to freedom."

Fortunately the waiter brought their food, and the conversation was interrupted. Secretly, Helen was a bit worried. This handsome youth, whose physical vitality so appealed to her, would present unexpected difficulties. He had not been in New York long enough to compromise his idealism with expediency. Helen was shrewd. She suspected Charley would be annoyed when he learned that his caricature had been published. He believed Helen's admiration was for the first sketch; the one of the nude girl. Helen needed no clairvoyance to understand the crossing of their purposes.

"The trouble is," Charley resumed quietly, after the waiter

left them, "the kind of freedom your gallant young friend Mannie craves is only a shoddy imitation of the nineties. People such as he, simply are the deformed grandchildren of those bright, wild years; they have inherited all of their license, and no blood-drop of their genius."

"Peter," she said softly, "You talk awfully well, when you forget yourself. I think I shall decide to let you be a poet." After a pause, she asked: "Have many women loved you?"

He laughed and shook his head. A rich light came into his eyes; a light that was rich as the richness of a smile he loved.

"But haven't you had infatuations—affairs, you know?" Helen persisted. "Episodes that you thought were the real thing—while they lasted?"

He thought of Constance, and the turn of his lips was grim. Across the stage of his memory passed that ridiculous moment in the park, when he broke their first kiss and their last; a grotesque pantomime.

"No!" he protested. "I am sorry to disappoint you. I have not had such—affairs, you said. I did not want them. The affair I wanted was for eternity, and it must be the real thing while it lasted!"

She shook her head.

"You are dreadfully old fashioned, Peter."

"Perhaps. I certainly did not have infatuations. My affairs were all in the imagination. But that was not enough. I did want the real thing, you see. I wanted the real woman—Venus her very self. I looked for her everywhere. In the crowds I peered from one face to another—and all were disappointments. It sounds foolish, I know, but I was serious. Once only I was mistaken. At all other times a glance was enough. I never stopped looking; the search went on with the minutes, day by day—I was a beggar but if I had found her, she should have been mine!"

Her eyes were twinkling.

"You went around looking at every woman you saw and rejecting them, one by one—just like that?" she teased.

"Just like that!"

"I think you are terribly conceited, Peter!"

"There was not one worthy of an—affair," he said decisively.

"And so you never found her," she sighed.

"I never expected to find her, Helen. I was sure that she had died; Venus was dead; Aphrodite was at the bottom of the sea. There was no woman left in the world, I said, worthy of the kind of love I had to give. And then—last night—"

Her eyes widened. She had met him last night in the art class!

"Go on, Peter," she whispered tensely, as his voice faltered.

"Can you possibly understand, or believe me, Helen? Last night—I think—I found her!"

Her blood was warm as red and living wine. She reached over, and her warm fingers closed around his hand.

"Peter," she murmured. "Dear Peter—let us wait until another time—and then I shall listen!"

He glanced at her curiously. Was it possible she had misunderstood him? Could she possibly suppose—

It was incredible. For an instant, he was tempted to tell her of Melodie, but something imperative sealed his lips.

It would have been a profanity.

They fell to talking of the life and the people around them. Helen was inspired with a thrill of triumph and conquest. A man who had looked upon multitudes of women, searching for Venus, had told her he believed the long quest ended. Her cheeks burned and her eyes were cendent with pleasure. Now she would be able to manage the conversation skillfully. Peter Gaunt must be adroitly handled, but Helen felt equal to the task.

She felt that she understood him.

"This boy," she said to herself, "is an idealist who has some hard lessons ahead of him. But he will learn, quickly enough. One does in this town. He evidently has dreams of becoming a great artist. Of course, he doesn't realize that he is a born cartoonist. He must learn that without getting his heart broken over it. Another case of Charlie Chaplin wanting to play Hamlet."

She smiled at him encouragingly.

"I have been thinking of a very interesting thing you said last night," she remarked brightly. "You remember—about the artist seeing into the soul of the model and painting that? It seems to me that is genius, and I think you have it, Peter; I think you have it in abundance."

He flushed happily. Praise was so rare; so sweet.

"I do hope to do that in my pictures," he confessed.

Silently she found a menu card, blank on the back, and laid it in front of him.

"Do something for me, will you, Peter?" she pleaded.
"Please?"

"I should like to please you, Helen."

"Then draw me one or two pictures on the back of this card. Just faces of people in this dining room. Here's a pencil. For my sake, Peter!"

"Why do you want me to do such a thing as that?" he demanded, aghast. "I've been looking at the faces of the people in this room. They are not pretty faces—too hard and fast and grimacing and artificial. Especially the women—for the women have a strength, and the men look weak, and that makes it worse. I would have to draw the souls reflected in their faces—and ugh! I like to draw beautiful things!"

"Peter Gaunt! I do think you are the most obstinate and extraordinary person!"

"Well, why do you want me to do such a thing?" he repeated.

"It's a little secret, Peter. I'll tell you all about it later, really I will. It might mean a great deal to—both of us, if you only would."

"I don't like to draw pictures like that. I want to create beauty. I like to draw beautiful things. But for you—of course. What shall I draw?"

"Let me see? There's Gustav Freunt over there. He would do splendidly. Gus is an awfully good chap. He started out to write symphonies and sonatas and high-brow things like that, but he found out soon enough the American composer hasn't a chance. He's that tall, good-looking man with the boyish face over yonder."

Charley stared curiously at the man she had indicated. Suspicion as well as curiosity was in his gaze.

"What does Gustav Freunt do now?" he asked distinctly.

"He's in the phonograph business. I think he's called the exploitation director for the instrument, or something like that."

Charley's glance became incensed. The man had sold out; that's what he had done. He had pawned his dreams to the manufacturer of a phonograph. Fury gathered in Charley's heart; a fury of reproach. He seized the pencil.

"I shall draw his soul for you, Helen," he promised bitterly. "It will not be a pretty thing. The soul of a man who sold his dreams to an organ grinder."

As a man possessed; his eyes intent, his lips drawn back, exposing the teeth, Charley bent over the menu card and began to draw.

For the moment he hated his model. This Gustav Freunt had abandoned art for the golden jingle of business. He had forsaken holy vows; he had rented his days and his nights for the selling of a music box. The man who could have brought down the songs of the angels to earth was now no more than a salesman.

Stroke by stroke he began to draw eyes and ears and brow and the lips that shall sing no more; parts of the face of a man who pawned his dreams to an organ grinder.

Eyes blinded with golden pieces. Ears stopped against the raptures of invisible choirs. Brow branded with the mark. Lips that shall sing no more.

There was a frenzy in Charley's fingers, and in his eyes a passion without mercy. As one possessed; as a man in a trance of accusation, he began to draw; on the back of the menu card he began to draw eyes and ears and brow, and the lips that shall sing no more.

He was lost in his task, unwitting of those about him, forgetful even of Helen Saylor. With furtive interest, she watched him at his beginning strokes. Soon a smile of satisfaction rose proudly to her lips. He did not observe, when she turned and beckoned. He did not guess that at the table yonder the eyes of Miriam Shaw, and Magda Marlowe Mather, and Dangerfield Masters, and Sonya Bellaire were watching him attentively, guessing what he was about.

Nor did he observe that a man arose from their table and approached in obedience to Helen's beckoning hand. She had summoned Gensler.

"He is drawing Gus Freunt," whispered Helen. "Now you shall see!"

Gensler nodded. He was ready to see. No one in the room understood the situation so clearly as did Gensler. To the publisher, the conditions were not only very clear, but agreeable. Helen was infatuated with this red-headed young man. She wanted to interest Gensler in the young man. Very well! If the young man could draw, Gensler might help him. Perhaps the young man could draw. Perhaps he could not. If he could not, Gensler would do nothing. He was first and last a practical publisher, and he could do nothing for Helen's young man if her young man had no remarkable

talent. If, however, her young man did have talent, then Gensler was ready to make a bargain with her. He was a lonely man, was Gensler. He liked young and attractive women, and he had found Helen both young and attractive. If she were willing to console him a little in his loneliness, he would give the boy a chance. Gensler would not be jealous of the boy. A middle-aged man cannot expect everything.

In silence, Gensler and Helen waited, while Charley drew, stroke by stroke, as a man possessed, the little portrait of a purchased soul.

Because he found silence a strength and a salvation, Gensler was a silent man. He distrusted speech. When Charley finished his picture, Gensler intended to look at it silently, and he intended saying very little about it, even if it were good, until he was alone with Helen.

With a short and vicious line, drawn down from the ear, Charley completed his sketch.

"There," he said, passing it to Helen. His hand was trembling. "See if I have drawn a face, or a soul!"

Helen gave the picture one glance; then, with a low gasp and a smile exultant in triumph, she put the card into Gensler's hand.

"Now!" she cried. "What have you got to say about that?"

The publisher stared at the picture. He put his free hand to the side of his face. His lips puckered and emitted a long, low whistle.

"My God!" he cried. "This thing is criminally libelous!"

Truth had broken his silence and extorted his confession. Truth was there in the picture. No one could misunderstand its shameful revelation. It was the portrait of a slave who had sold his own freedom for a warm bed and gruel. The blinded eyes were there, and the stopped up ears and the branded brow and the lips that could sing no more. The likeness was more than a likeness; the eyes were open, yet certainly blind;

and the brow was smooth, and yet mysteriously and invisibly branded; the ears free, yet deafened and dead, and the lips unmarked, yet dumb. Invisible lines somehow cried out the truth; the soul was present in every stroke, patent and pitiful.

"Mr. Gaunt," said Gensler fervently, "I didn't expect what Helen had said could be true. But it is true. This picture says something awful about that man. Now I know it! I'm—I'm glad I met you, Mr. Gaunt!"

Charley felt a bit dazed. As he worked over the drawing, he had forgotten his surroundings. All that he had seen clearly was the model he hated and the card on which he had drawn. Everything else was blurred into an incoherence.

Now he was emerging from the daze, but slowly. Helen was introducing him to some one. The some one was Mr. Gensler. Mr. Gensler was a publisher, one of the wealthiest and most influential men in New York. Mr. Gensler was much interested in Mr. Gaunt, and wanted to have a talk with him. As Charley's mind cleared, he heard Helen saying:

"I am having Peter up to my apartment for dinner to-night. Why don't you drop in Gensler, and then we can all talk?"

Gensler gave her a glance, charged with meaning.

"I'll telephone you later in the afternoon, if you'll be home," he said. "Maybe I can come!"

Turning, he shook hands with Charley.

"I hope I can see you to-night, Mr. Gaunt," he said. "You know how to get character into a sketch, I'll say that for you!"

With another bow, the publisher returned to the curious group of Helen's friends at the table across the aisle, where he was immediately bombarded with questions.

Charley leaned nearer to Helen, his eyes glowing with surprise and gratitude.

"Now I know why you asked me to draw that stupid picture. Helen, you are being very good to me. I——"

"You'll surely come to-night, Peter? It will mean everything to your future—everything. There is nothing that man Gensler can't do for you. And he will do it, too."

"Why should he bother to do anything for me?"

"That," smiled Helen bewilderingly, "is a mystery known only to me, Peter. But don't you worry. I won't let him stay long to-night. We'll pack him off early—and then we'll be just to ourselves."

Her pretty face was flushed; her eyes were shining, and when she gave him her hand, in parting, the flesh was warm, quivering and eager. Beautiful and desirable was Helen, as she gave her warm and eager hand into his, as they lingered on the sidewalk; upon her, there was a glow of resolved decision. She would know what to say to Gensler when he telephoned.

"To-night? At seven?" she asked him again.

"To-night. At seven," he promised.

He was glad the luncheon was over. He was sorry he had been tricked into making a dinner engagement. Of course, it was important that he had impressed Gensler. But everything about it all had a practical aspect, and he was thinking of Melodie.

The luncheon had not seemed to him anything like as important as Helen undoubtedly believed it to be. Subconsciously he felt there was something mistaken about it; a suspicion he could not define. Now that it was over, there seemed to be wings to his feet again. He could hasten to the last of the little wooden houses, forty-five seconds from Broadway.

All that morning he had wanted to go to her, but he had decided that an afternoon call might please her better; after a late night in the theater, she would want to sleep. He was glowing with joy, not because of Helen or of Gensler, but because he was on his way at last to Melodie.

The piper's tune in his soul seemed to sing to him that not

Gensler, but Melodie, could open the gateway wide into the garden of his desires.

Yet, as he walked down Sixth Avenue, he realized that Gensler might prove a help. He was not in a position to disregard practical assistance, was he? He must not be a fool altogether. That he should be recognized so quickly, he regarded as fortunate but not extraordinary. This was because he believed, not only in himself, but in the island and its inhabitants. This place to which he had fled was a refuge and an asylum where one who had beauty to manifest would find a ready welcome. He thrilled with gratitude toward Helen. Some day he would be able to repay her in kind, perhaps; whether he would accept her help or not, she meant to be kind to him.

Suddenly he felt guilty. He remembered the lunatics. They, too, had been kind. Since he had been in New York, he had scarcely thought of them. Then he smiled confidently. They would understand. Old Doctor Tanneyday, Leverton of the thousand faces, Mr. Blessings. And D. D. D.!

Where was he now? Would he not be proud of the ready welcome his pupil was finding on the island?

He had come again to the street of the little wooden houses. A doubt of a new kind attacked his thoughts. He had seen this girl, this Melodie, but twice in his life; once in the dark madness of a flight in the night, and then at a distance in a theater. Was it not more than possible he was acting like a fool? After all, might not his fond and romantic imagination be playing him tricks; laying a dismal trap for him?

But the sweet piper Whim played on, and he followed like a heedless child.

"Nobody else but I could think it possible," he replied to his doubts. "But I do think it is possible. I think it is true!"

Here was the little window, with its modest picture exposed for sale; the house where Melodie lived. There was something good-natured and friendly about that window; some-

thing of welcome in the old shutters with their frayed green paint; something benignant and tolerant and kind.

"Queer," said Charley to himself, as he walked down the little steps that led to the basement door, "queer and odd. I remember saying once that I felt as if I had never been home. That little window—"

He rapped on the door. Again he heard the distant barking of a dog, and the voice of Alexander Watts calling impatiently. Then the door opened, and the eyes of the old man peered out.

"God help us, Mr. Gaunt! It's you!" exclaimed Watts. "I'm glad you've come, sir. I won't ask you in; tell you why in a minute. Where did you get to, last night, Mr. Gaunt? You should have seen the little girl, sir. She cried like a baby, and she carried on as only she knows how to carry on. Why didn't I take your address down? she wanted to know. Didn't I know you were a stranger in New York and might get lost? If she asked me that once, Mr. Gaunt, she asked me a hundred times. She laid me out, Mr. Gaunt, for a damned old fool. God help us, sir, where did you get to?"

Charley wrung the old man's hand.

"Where is she now?" he begged. "I've got so much I want to say to her."

"She's at the theater, worse luck. There's a matinée to-day, but that's why I didn't invite you in, Mr. Gaunt. Go on up there! Know what the little girl really thought? She thought she wasn't fine enough for you; you were a gentleman; she said she could see that with one eye shut, and she guessed you thought better of it and that's why you didn't come back. If she was to find you at the stage door when she comes out—"

Charley shook his hand again.

"She'll find me there," he promised fervently. "*Au revoir*, Mr. Watts."

"Good luck and God bless you, Mr. Gaunt. And don't you disappoint that little girl this time!"

CHAPTER THIRTY

WOMAN

CHARLEY decided not to attend the matinée performance in the Summer Garden. He had no mind to taint his expectant mood with the tinsel and jangle of a *revue*, nor to spoil the memory of Melodie in the fountain by looking upon it so soon again. Now it was a remembrance of utter perfection.

Upon a hill, near to a stream, in the midst of Central Park he found a bench, and there he decided to linger during the intervening hours. As he lingered there he invited honestly the sneers and doubts of his common sense. But they came no more; all the strings of his soul were vibrating with the music of the piper's magic tune.

He yearned for her with a longing altogether impractical and nonsensical, eager for the sluggish hours to pass on into eternity.

It may have been odd that scarcely once during his lonely waiting did he remember Gensler, or even Helen Saylor.

She came out of the stage door alone.

Her little hat was a shy spring green, to match the emerald of her suit, and the collar of her waist was lavender. And her hair was red as morning flame, and her lips scarlet as the petals of the nasturtium, and her eyes violet pools of light.

As she stepped into the street, he strode toward her quickly and pronounced her name. Her eyes lifted quickly and met his blue gaze, earnest and intense and rejoicing.

"You!" she gasped. "Old trooper!"

His hand had found hers and held it fast; so small a hand, and so cold, and yet the first touch of her was a caress. The loiterers around the stage door gaped at them; they were at the entrance, saying not a word, as if each was dumb, looking into the eyes of the other.

And then there was a wetness in her eyes while she smiled; the arch, swift smile that he remembered; the baffling smile so full of meaning that he could not understand, but only love and reverence.

"I'm—I'm glad," she said. "Uncle Alex told me——"

"Melodie," he said impetuously, "I've got so much to say to you. Can't you come with me now—anywhere—just you and I?"

She put her hand through his arm and they walked on down the shabby street, away from Broadway. Not until they came to a crossing did she speak.

"It's great to see you again," she smiled. "I've thought so much about you—that night, and the cheese sandwiches and everything. I'd like—to go with you right now a lot. More than you'd think, I suppose. But I just can't. I've got to go somewhere else."

"And I couldn't possibly go with you, Melodie?"

She turned her eyes toward him inquiringly, as if she would explore the private recesses of his heart.

"I'm—I'm afraid you can't," she replied with difficulty.

"Melodie," he protested, "I can't bear to part from you just when I'm so happy at finding you. I can't lose sight of you now. Isn't there any way——"

Her eyes were still upon him searchingly, occupied with their inquiry.

"I wonder if you would understand?" she mused aloud.

"I would understand anything for you, Melodie—if you'd only not send me away!"

"You see," she explained reluctantly, "this is the visiting

day at the hospital. It had to fall on matinée day, I guess. But they'll let me see him, as a special favor, after the show, because they know I can't come the regular hours. So you see——”

“Melodie, is it the man who brought you to New York that is sick? Is that why you think I shouldn't go?”

His voice was brittle. He saw her hand touch her cheek in a futile little gesture of pain.

“That was why—I tried to go back home,” she said, with a quick breath. “He—the man you asked about—he died last week down in—Arizona.”

“Oh, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked that. It was a caddish thing to ask—please forgive me and forget that I asked it. But can't you understand? I want to be with you, Melodie,—I need you!”

The violet eyes stared at him; the scarlet lips trembled.

“If you'll promise to understand,” she said, “you can come along with me.”

Careless of the crowds, he caught her slim, cold hand and kissed it.

“Melodie,” he promised, “I shall understand—anything.”

An unreasonable content was in Charley Turner's heart, merely that he was with her. They did not speak as they walked uptown together, crossing through the park, sweet with the smells of spring.

He was thinking:

“Why did I say she was cheap? I was a monster to have said so. There is something rich and dear in her. Something unreachable! I'm glad! I'm glad! I'm glad!”

Almost before they knew it, they had come to a red brick building, a block in length; a gaunt, harsh, unlovely place, with many windows, over which the chastening shadows of the late afternoon hovered somehow pityingly. Into a long,

cool corridor they walked, still silent and still content; up two wide flights of stairs, and there Melodie paused.

Presently a woman, rustling in her starched blue linen, met them. She smiled at Melodie as at one she knew and liked.

"You are just in time," she whispered. At Melodie's glance, she turned toward Charley. "Yes, your friend may come too!"

Only a short walk down the hallway and they had come to a closed door. With a sign, the nurse cautioned them to remain there, and then she opened the door and passed in, leaving it open after her.

Charley looked through the door, down a strange and unexpected vista. This was evidently a ward for crippled children; the last thing he would have anticipated. Never had he thought about children, and, least of all, crippled children. Somehow, they were alien to his world. Now here, before his eyes, the new vista opened up; a vista of little white beds, each with its own small sufferer; a lane of little sick boys, with big, hurt eyes looking at him through the shadows.

"What is this place?" he whispered.

"It's the Hospital for Crippled Children," Melodie told him softly. "Poor little kids! Just think! They're just exactly like other little kids—in here."

She touched her heart nervously with her hand.

"They want to run around just like anybody else. Every kid in that room would like to play baseball and chase cats. But they can't. There they are—and there they've got to stay. Some of them with tuberculosis spines, tuberculosis hips, rickety kids, clamped all day, twenty-four hours a day, to an iron frame—when they want to run and jump like the other kids. It's just plain hell! Listen, old trooper . . . it's all so what that artist friend of mine called it—bucolic! I'm afraid I'm going to cry!"

She put her cold little hand in his. The voice of the nurse, calm and serene, was raised, intoning old words. And with the lifting of her voice was lifted the eager, plaintive treble of the voices of the little boys, clamped to their iron frames in the white beds.

“Now I lay me down to sleep
I pray the Lord my soul to keep.
If I should die before I wake
I pray the Lord my soul to take.
And this I ask for Jesus sake
Amen!”

There was a moment's reverent hush, and then the nurse beckoned toward Melodie. With a rush, Melodie ran fleetly down the aisle, toward one white bed in the rear. Charley remained near the door, watching. He saw Melodie bend over the form lying in the bed; he saw two thin little arms reach up and twine around her neck; he saw her lift the child and nestle it close to her, a baby cheek laid against her face.

The twilight glow was upon them, as she stood by the open window. He did not need to ask. He knew that in Melodie's arms lay the flesh of her own flesh, crippled child of the love she had given the man who died.

Strange and terrifying miracle! Amazing and bewildering woman! Last night you were Aphrodite, rising gracefully from the sea! Now mother and child! Red Magdalen and white Madonna!

Holy mystery that is here unshrouded!

There was a tightness in his throat and a wet mist swimming in his eyes. Her smile! Melodie was smiling down gently upon the little body in her arms. The arch, swift smile that came and vanished so soon.

Might he not now understand the glory and the mystery of her smile? It was at once Mary's smile and Magdalen's, nor could either possess it alone. This moment was a revela-

tion; for Mary was once Aphrodite to the carpenter who wooed her—was it not so, even in Bethlehem?

He seemed to hear that inner voice speaking. Thrill and tremble, dreamer, as you look at this, for now it has been shown unto you. Look upon it with those occult eyes you boast! At last you know woman—mingled and made together out of Mary and Magdalen. Paint the picture if you can, for Truth is here to be witnessed and made manifest; put it on canvas now, if you can, in muscle and curve and ligament and smile, twin mystery and beauty and wonder of the ages, for this is Woman as God has made her, and everlasting unto everlasting waits upon its rendering.

Paint, dreamer, if you can, the Madonna Melodie.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

THE WONDERFUL THING

IN her studio apartment, on the sky floor of a lower Fifth Avenue hotel, Helen Saylor was waiting for the coming of the red-haired young idealist for whom she had conceived a sudden and violent physical attraction.

She recognized, however, that no episode of her colorful history had meant quite so much to her as this Peter Gaunt and his extraordinary dreams. All of the men with whom she had been infatuated had been different, but Peter Gaunt was a new man altogether, a new kind of man, and the tumult in Helen's heart was a new kind of tumult, stranger to her memory, and containing some promise of permanence.

Having fallen in love with him, promptly and completely, as had been her way, she was beginning to realize that her own feelings, too, were different.

That, undoubtedly, increased her annoyance at his tardiness. Already it was half past seven, by the ticking of the Sèvres china clock on the mantel. Why should Peter be late? They had agreed solemnly and faithfully together on the time. Seven o'clock! They had said it, as if it were a covenant. What was the matter with him? Men who had an appointment with Helen Saylor were never tardy.

Moreover, she was impatient to tell him exciting and pleasant news. Gensler had telephoned. Also, Gensler had been to see her. He could not remain to talk to Peter, but that did not matter; from Helen's viewpoint, it was better, and everything had been arranged to Gensler's satisfaction. Peter

would be astonished at what Helen could do for him, would do for him, through this tractable Gensler. Peter was to call on Gensler in the morning, and he would be given a position, drawing caricatures for one of Gensler's publications. His salary would be one hundred dollars a week at the start. After that, fame, power, wealth, everything would be within the reach of his hands.

Why didn't he come? The silent little Japanese maid came and went, glancing reproachfully at the waiting table. All was in readiness; why *didn't* he come? Helen tapped her foot nervously; she lit a cigarette, puffed once and threw the thing in the fireplace.

Damn!

She had contrived most carefully a proper *mise en scène*. They were to dine together in a room of shadows. Everything else in the room was obliterated in the masses of shadows; the soft lamps on the table would give a light to their faces, leaving nothing around them but those friendly shadows, purple, warm, improbable.

In this there was shrewd design. Otherwise, Peter might have been disappointed, or, perhaps, distracted. The low divan, the swinging censer with its coiling smoke, the ebony idol with its offering of cherry blooms, the dragon rug, the inlaid apparatus of the hooka, might not have appealed to him. For most of Helen's visitors, these properties of an oriental stage setting were gratifying; they satisfied the thirst for atmosphere. Helen was clever enough to surmise that Peter was different; the more she left to his imagination, the happier they might both be.

Anything might be imagined in those shadows.

She had been planning phrases which she believed would woo him.

"Let us eat together, Peter, of the figs of the Bo tree," was one on which she counted especially. It was the kind of thing she felt certain to impress him. "My soul was born in

a banyan tree," was another. She had read both of them somewhere.

To her attirement, she had given careful thought. There was a gown which she had had designed for a dance in one of the Village halls; a Bagdad girl's costume, full of the ravishment of the East; trimmed with the bangles of barbarism. When she wore it, Helen put clinking jewels in her ears; precious bands jingled on her wrists, and the clang-clang of her anklets made a song of her feet.

She decided against that costume. Peter Gaunt would never like her in it. Helen did not know how she knew this, but her intuition was sufficient. Instead, she chose a negligée, simple and yet seductive, too; more like a veil than a gown, concealing much, and promising even more. Thus, arrayed *in cuerpo*, her raiment should beguile his imagination.

In her year abroad, Helen had flirted in capitals where love making is an art. She had become an expert in coquetry —having tantalized the frock-coated bandits of the Bourse, the pompous magnificoes of Venice, the hidalgos of Madrid, and even the solemn visaged merchants of Vienna.

But she was not sure about this red-headed young idealist. Here, to-night, in the shadows, anything might happen. She hoped it would. She was not sure. He was the first ever to keep her waiting.

Why didn't he come?

When his knock came finally at her door, it was almost eight o'clock. Helen saw at once that he was not himself; that something tremendous had excited him. There was an incoherence in his eyes, an hysteria in the very feel of his hand, as if his body, indeed, was in her room, as he had promised, but his mind and soul had tarried whence he came.

"Oh, Peter, I'm so glad you came. I was so worried about you, dear. And I've wonderful news for you—perfectly wonderful. Gensler has been here. He couldn't wait to see you,

but that doesn't matter. I guess we're neither of us very sorry about that. But every thing is settled, Peter—Gensler is going to do for you anything I want him to. Isn't that wonderful?"

"Of course it is!" he smiled mechanically. "Perfectly so. Yes. Gensler, of course. He will do anything for me, will he? That is wonderful news, Helen. Of course it is."

"But Peter, you don't seem glad. I don't think you realize what it means to you. It means you are going to be—famous!"

"That is wonderful news, Helen. Yes. I am a thousand times obliged about that. I suppose I seem rather stupid about it. Of course. Yes. But so much has happened since I've seen you to-day—oh, so much, so much. It's incredible. It's unbelievable. Gensler—yes. Gensler will do anything for me, will he? Well, there's a very great deal I shall want him to do, then. A great deal—so many unbelievable things have happened to-day. I——"

"Sit right down there, Peter. That's a good boy. You are all excited about something, and I'm so glad for you about it, even if I don't know about it yet. If wonderful things have been happening to you, I shall forgive you for being an hour late for my dinner. And if the soup is cold, and the dinner burned, we shall not care. Your dinner——"

"Dinner! I've *had* my dinner!"

"Peter!"

"It sounds terrible! I know! You'll think me a cad and all that. I'm terribly sorry—but I couldn't, wouldn't have done otherwise for the world. This moment I am in a very daze of happiness, Helen. You must understand. You are the kind of woman that can understand—I know that. If I had been invited to the first Eucharist to-night, I should have stayed where I was—in Childs'!"

"*In Childs'!*"

"Yes! Yes! In Childs'! It was wonderful! We had wheat cakes!"

"*Wheat cakes!*"

"With honey! Nothing could have been so wonderful! Better than pomegranates out of the Garden of Eden; sweeter than lotus leaves! They might have stewed me oysters in the juices of pears; mixed me curries hot as the wind of India, served me the impossible dishes of the Chinese emperor—bah for all that! I have had wheat cakes at Childs'!"

"Peter, what has come over you?"

"It was wonderful, Helen—wonderful!"

She sat back and stared at him silently. The maid was removing his soup; he had not touched that, or the fruit. What was happening here? Was he just an ignorant boor, after all? Or was he mad? Or what—

"Can't you enlighten me about this wonderful thing?" she asked lightly. "Surely there must have been some other attraction beside the—did you say wheat cakes?"

"Venus, the Mother of God, had dinner with me," he replied, suddenly taking a devilish delight in tormenting her. He had sensed her antagonism, and was ready to meet it.

She was aghast, outraged, and a little frightened.

"I am afraid I don't understand."

The hurt note in her voice broke his displeasure, and he was instantly contrite.

"I know I sound like a raving fool; forgive me," he pleaded. "I know I am a raving fool. But this means so much to me—this wonderful thing. All my life I have sought and sought and sought, and to-night I have found. Found, Helen! Think what that must mean to a man who has always been seeking and who has never found anything before. I am just a quivering mass of thrills as I sit here—I don't want to eat any of these tempting dishes you have before me. I hunger for—wheat cakes!"

"What it is you have found?" she asked dully.

"Venus! Aphrodite! Mary, the Mother of God, and Mag-dalen, Queen of Love, sat across the table from me in Childs' not an hour ago. And to think that all my life I have looked for her—but I never found her, of course, because I did not know what an ideal woman was like. Now I know. And now I have found her—Woman, complete, think of that, Helen—Woman, complete, as God has made her to be, eating wheat cakes with me in Childs'. I may love her, too; there is no mistake about that; we love each other. Think of that; I may love her through eternity, and it will be the real thing while it lasts, and loving her I may publish her beauty on canvas, so that the world may love her, too. After I have made that picture, the world will know what an ideal woman is like; every man will know what to seek, and every man shall find Venus for himself. Isn't that wonderful?"

She brushed her hand lightly across her eyes.

"Go on, Peter," she faltered.

"Do you understand my ravings? I mean that I have actually found her. I have found what Woman means, what she actually is, at last. That is the wonderful thing that thrills me now—I am on fire about it; my flesh is flaming; I feel I am being consumed. My blood is like a torrent of fire, scorching me all over. I can't be normal and natural and polite, Helen, on a night like this—can I? You wouldn't expect me to, would you? I knew I could count on you understanding and sympathizing with me. And this man, Gensler. What can he do for me? I want to paint that picture. I've got to learn how to paint; every moment, every hour for years I've got to work, work, work, until I am strong enough to paint it as it should be painted. I mustn't lose time. What will he do? Will he lend me money while I study and work, and learn how to paint such a picture as that? Do you think he will do that for me? That is what I want Gensler to do. If he believes in me, he will invest in

me. That is all I ask—he shall not lose a penny in the transaction. Will he do it?"

All around them shadows—the lamps lighting their faces; his white with enthusiasm; Helen's curiously pale. This was a shock. She was not the Venus he had found last night. She—oh, it was absurd, humiliating. She had been an utter fool. Yet there he was, so vital, so buoyant, so full of the call of the man to woman! And something else was in him, too—something that awoke within her a stirring of buried and beautiful memories.

"Peter," she said crisply, "I am afraid your enthusiasm is running away with you. Take a glass of water, and sit silent there, and listen to me. You are all worked up over some great dream you have seen. Now listen to me. I know the game in New York, and I know how it is played. This is not the Renaissance. Painters do not do things to-day as they did when Da Vinci was doing the Mona Lisa. People are more practical to-day; this is a practical age. I am glad—very glad, Peter—that you think you have found your ideal woman. I hope you are not deceived in her. But even if you have found her, and you are not deceived in her—what can you do with some fanciful idea of painting a great picture of her? Every artist fancies that of his lady fair. It is natural and beautiful. But this *is* a practical world, Peter. There is not the remotest chance in the world that Gensler, or any one else, will stake you while you learn to paint, on the chance that you would do a good picture and be able to pay them back. The chances are all against your ever doing it, but then, you may. I do believe in you, Peter. But there isn't any one left in the world who would be your patron on that chance. It simply isn't being done, and hasn't been for many years, Peter!"

She paused, and studied his face. He was looking at her, his face telling no tales of what he was thinking.

"Now, do be sensible, Peter, and don't be hurt at what I

am going to say. Nothing can keep you back, if you will only be practical. Gensler is interested in you. He believes you have a great deal of talent. He is ready to put you on his staff. That is a good fortune almost beyond belief. I was able to do that for you, because—well, I was able to do it. And I did believe in your ability. But Gensler doesn't want you to paint for him. He wants you to become a cartoonist for him—there! That's out!"

"*A cartoonist?*"

"Yes!"

Charley stood up at the table and glared down at her.

"Be precise!" he said coldly.

"He wants you to draw for him—faces, caricatures, like the one you did of Stockbridge last night at the art class, and the one of Gus Freunt. He will pay you one hundred dollars a week if you do that for him—a hundred dollars a week, and who knows where you will be before you get through? You'll be riding around in your Rolls-Royce some day!"

"And what, precisely, is a Rolls-Royce?"

"Why, Peter, of course you know that. It's a very expensive car."

"I do not wish to ride. Can't you understand that, Helen? I do not wish to dine at the Onandaga, or ride in a Rolls-Royce, or prosper in any degree. I do not wish to get drunk and bathe in a pool, or sell thumpy mechanical pianos, and I will not draw ugly pictures for one hundred dollars a week, no, and not for one hundred thousand dollars a week!"

"Peter! Don't be melodramatic about it!"

"Compromise! Bargain! Go, young man, and draw hands in the antique class! No!"

They were facing each other. In his eyes was the angry light that had been there when he drew on the menu card at noon.

"Helen," he said tensely, "as I look at you there, I seem to see you, not as a woman who has tried in her own way to

serve me, but as the red symbol of a terrible truth. You are old as the ages, out of Egypt! I seem to see you holding out your hands to me, enticing me, beguiling me, making me earnest promises of warm delight. Your eyes call, and your hands and your parted lips; you entreat me to sell you my soul and betray the god that commands my service. I cannot yield. You are the old harlot of the world; I must leave my cloak in your hands and run!"

"You vile beast!" she screamed.

"You may not understand me now, but some day you will. I had no wish to hurt you. You meant me no harm; you wanted only to be kind. But you are asking me to sell my birthright. I dare not fashion ugliness, when I behold beauty! I must be faithful; I must paint my picture!"

"Your picture!" she sneered shrilly. "Your damned fool idea! I think you're crazy! You're a lunatic, that's what you are! What does the world care for your old picture? You'll find out. There's no room for that sort of thing in the world to-day, you poor fool. I got you a chance you couldn't have got for yourself in a hundred years—and you throw it away for an empty dream!"

"I do!" he said quietly, finding his hat.

She rushed across the floor, and thrust her hot face close to his.

"Stop and think!" she cried huskily. "Don't be a fool!"

"I cannot think!" he replied. "I feel—I must run!"

"You'll starve!" she cried, stamping her foot. "You'll see what becomes of your dreams!"

"I may starve," he replied, his hand on the knob of her door. "But my dream shall not starve. You can put a dreamer in a pit, but as there is night and morning, you cannot cage his dream!"

"We shall see!" she leered.

"We shall see!" he agreed.

The door closed behind him, and he was gone.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

A PRECIOUS FOOL

IT was an utterly indefensible thing that he had done to Helen Saylor.

By the time Charley had reached the avenue, he realized this. The wind of the young spring night quickly altered his mood. There was no resentment left in him. In her rooms, he had hotly resented her attitude. She had entreated him to draw ugly pictures for Gensler! The thought, even now, reddened his temples. If he had urged her to become a strumpet, would she not have been angry?

That was what her proposal had meant to him. If he were to make ugly pictures, while his soul yearned to express the beauty it had seen, he would be prostituting his dreams, at a price. Better to count bills in John Strickler's brush factory than to yield to such a compromise.

Yet he was touched with remorse at the insolence he had displayed toward Helen. The situation reminded him austere of the afternoon on which he had thrust Constance Lane from his arms, because he had tasted her lipstick. Strange that then he had felt no remorse. A streak of distant remorse was in him now for Helen Saylor not alone, but for Constance and even for Clara. What was happening to him?

Was it any wonder, after all, that Helen Saylor refused to take his dreams seriously? Who would? To do the beautiful thing he meant to do, he would need the brush of Da Vinci, the palette of Velasquez, the white hand of Raphael.

Helen had reminded him that this was the twentieth century. And he had not yet begun to learn how to paint!

He grinned into the darkness of the little park with a cheerful and unfathomed impudence. For this decision to cling fast to his fancies, now reiterated, his mind was not responsible; it could only acquiesce to a greater governor. The voice of his impulse ruled. Upon him there was an inexorable certainty of repose. Never had the mandate of his soul been more distinctly uttered. To these dreams he must cling. What if he did starve, as Helen had predicted? They were worth starving for. The mists of incoherence had rolled off; at last he could see.

His brain was like a crystal. Everything was clear; beautifully distinct. For a long time he had stood impatiently on a threshold, beating against a dark door. Now the door was opened and he was looking through.

He had found his dream woman. All the rest of it had come with that sweet miracle. In those old days of hopeless dreaming, he had smiled at himself, not believing her possible. What an altogether different creature he had imagined her from the rest of women! There was no one like her. In her there was something of everything beautiful. This gracious woman of his musings and his meditations—she had been all woman, intensely and absolutely feminine. Her body was exquisitely rounded, inclined toward slenderness, but with full, enticing breasts. A face languorously sweet, yet vitally alive. Hair of sunset red.

"Too good to be true!" he had said to himself. To him her dream face had been as music.

And now he had found her. On a train, riding on a dark flight, he had discovered her. Was this not joy enough for him to forgive even Helen Saylor? How could she have met his transport and his exaltation?

This wonderful Melodie! He loved her—with what coursing, throbbing and precious tenderness he loved her! Rising

from the water she had come; for him the sea had given up its beautiful dead.

To him she had disclosed the rare secret of her sex; the mystery and charm and wonder that is woman, at once Venus and Madonna. Hitherto men had separated this mystery that God had made one in flesh and mind and spirit. For him, for Charley Turner, the brush clerk, the lunatic; for Peter Gaunt, the man who was but three weeks old; the man that had been reborn on the rocky island of dreams; for him was reserved a task noble and privileged. He was to paint a picture which should unite in a single depiction, perhaps in a single stroke, this dual amazement.

Presently Charley rose from the bench and started walking northward with long, eager steps. He had come to a practical decision. There must be some means by which he could earn a living agreeably, while he learned to paint. He would go to the little wooden house, just forty-five seconds from Broadway, and ask the advice of old man Watts. He knew art intimately, he loved Melodie, and he would surely listen.

The old man was truly glad to see him again. In the little basement room they sat down together, and Charley came directly to the point. It was an impetuous narrative, full of native eloquence. For nearly an hour he talked, while Watts gravely smoked pipefuls of tobacco, exclaiming every now and then, "God bless us, Mr. Gaunt! God help us all!"

With increasing wonder, the old man heard the tale. His faded eyes brightened as the story grew, and now and then he chuckled sagely.

"I wonder," he remarked, after a solemn pause, "if you realize what a precious fool you are!"

He sucked his pipe meditatively.

"A precious fool," he repeated, with increasing conviction. "Full of—full of—God help us, I don't know what you *are* full of, young man. But you're full of it! Do you know what you are up against? Your art education should have

begun ten years ago. Do you seriously believe that at your time of life you can learn to be a painter, big enough to do a picture like this you've been telling me about?"

Charley nodded.

"And then you complicate matters by arguing that you are in love with my little Melodie?"

"I don't argue it. I know it, Mr. Watts."

"How can you know it?" demanded the old man, suddenly petulant. "You lay down these things as if they were gospel. They're not gospel; nothing like it. And even if you did know it, what about her? How do you know she loves you, or ever will love you? That's what you haven't told me yet!"

Charley stood up and looked down into the old man's face.

"We—we do!" he said earnestly. "We do love each other. It is in her eyes, the way she looks at me. It is on her lips, when she smiles. Oh, Mr. Watts, I know it all sounds preposterous if you want to look at it like John Stricker would look at it. It isn't reasonable, or sensible, I know. But it's true. That is the wonderful thing about it. It's—all true!"

"A case of love at first sight," said the old man sarcastically.

"Now look here, Mr.——"

"Now you look here, Mister! You came to me. I didn't come to you! You came to me with the wildest ideas I ever heard from any young man in all my born days. Don't you get excited with me. You sit down in that chair and listen and keep quiet. There's one or two things you don't seem to understand or appreciate. The first thing you want to get under that red thatch of yours is that Melodie is dearer to my old heart than anything else in the world. She's made one mistake, if you can call it that, and I don't want to see her make another. I don't intend to see her heart broken, even if that meant you painted the most wondreful picture ever made! I love that little girl as if she were my very own. It's her I'm thinking about now! You say she loves you.

Maybe so, maybe not! I'll have to hear what she says about that. But suppose she does. What are you going to do about it? You can't marry her. You're a married man, and, if I want to call you that, you're an escaped lunatic! Am I to entrust Melodie to a man who ran away from a wife and an insane asylum?"

"You know I am sane," replied Charley huskily. "And as for marriage, why can't we be married? My old self is dead. I am a new man altogether. Who would ever know?"

"It's risky," mused the old man glumly. "It's bigamy!"

"Bah!" cried Charley, with a snap of his fingers. "No one will ever know except we three!"

"You would tell her?"

"Of course!"

"Well, if she is willing to marry you, knowing all that, nothing else could stop her anyway!"

"Besides all that," he resumed, "I don't think a girl like Melodie ought to waste herself on an adventurer who talks like a wild man!"

"You're damned unfair!" cried Charley.

"I'm nothing of the kind, Mr. Gaunt. I'm simply using my common sense. You ask me to believe you are a genius—and you don't even know how to paint!"

"But——"

"You are full of buts. And you still haven't answered my question. Suppose that you do love each other. What are you going to do about it?"

"It is not what I am going to do about it, Mr. Watts. You don't seem to understand. It is what we are going to do about it. Melodie and I can settle that for ourselves!"

The old man stared at him cryptically. There was no key to interpret the meaning of his scrutiny. He was studying Charley intently.

"Peter," he said, at length, "I have made you angry, and maybe I have hurt you. But I haven't been half as severe as

I should be. You see what you want, and you hate everything that stands in your way. That is youth! Let it pass! After all, I have very little right in the matter. I am just an old man, who loves little Melodie very much. And love like this you are telling me about is so often heart-break. I don't want her heart to be broken."

"I shan't—"

"Never mind! I understand. And now, my son, let me tell you about myself a very little. As I sat here listening to you, I was frankly amazed. This life you have lived, these dreams you have held to so steadfastly—they are a rebuke to me. I had my dreams once. They starved and died. I starved them myself. No one else can starve our dreams but ourselves. I did it; God help me, I did it. I gave up, for lack of faith and courage. You held on. That makes me want to love you, too, my boy. I want to help you. This idea that you have for a picture thrills my soul. I—I don't want to seem to be mawkish, but I wonder if you can understand and forgive? I mean that as I heard you telling me how you loved Melodie, and how she would be the inspiration for your picture—well, there was a warmth here in my heart as if an old spark in the ashes had taken flame. I would like to help you!"

"I knew you would!"

"Not so fast! Not so fast, my young friend. There is much that stands in the way. You tell me how you surprised these people with your two drawings. That means nothing to me. It takes very little to surprise such people. I do not know if you have really fire, and if you haven't, I can't help you. But if you have—"

The old man stood up, holding out his hand with the pipe clutched between his fingers, as if it were a smoking censer at an altar, and he were there to profess an oath.

"If you have, then I am willing to give you the rest of my old years. I can teach you! All the dreams I slew shall

come to life again through you. You are like an instrument—if you have but fire, boy. I sound like a driveling old fool! God help us, I am! But I do know how to paint! I can teach you as the masters of old taught the young men with dreams! I see it very clearly, Peter. If you have only fire——”

His eyes were alight as he came nearer to Charley.

“It must be so!” he muttered. “It all depends on that. If you have fire, little Melodie will love you, and you can paint. If you have not fire——”

He sank wearily into his chair.

“God help us all!” he gasped.

In a few moments, Watts became intensely practical.

“You must draw me a picture, here and now,” he decided. “You must show me, as you say you have showed those others, that you have fire!”

“Let me draw—Melodie’s face,” proposed Charley at once.

“No, young man! Not yet—perhaps not for years. Dream on, my red-haired friend, until every stroke you make is worthy of her! No—why not draw me a picture of—the brush man?”

“*Mr. Stricker?*”

“Why not?”

Charley’s grin was almost discouraged. John Stricker! A very large father-in-law of a man, with a round, grizzly head, and drooping cheeks, mottled and splotched. A jesting paunch and a rapacious jowl. Mr. John Stricker, president of the Atlass Brush Company, ready to spring an original.

“I can’t do that,” declared Charley. “I shall never draw another ugly picture as long as I live.”

“And you can’t find anything beautiful in the brush man?”

“Absurd!”

“You have a great deal to learn, Peter,” old Watts said

severely. "There is certainly something beautiful in that man—because there is something beautiful in everything. There is even a dream in his factory—for those of us who have eyes to see."

"A woman told me that once," Charley exclaimed, remembering Constance. "But I cannot understand it—I cannot see it!"

The old art dealer made a flourish of dismissal with his pipe.

"Draw something in which you do see beauty," he said.

A happy inspiration came to Charley. He was forbidden to draw the face he loved best in the world; he would draw another face that he cherished very dearly. Over the paper he bent, his eyes warm with pleasant purpose. Rapidly he sketched a gentle countenance. It was not difficult to find, or to express, the beauty in those serene eyes; the ascetic contour of that lofty brow. In the few and limited lines of this hasty drawing, he found it somehow simple to infuse a part of a soul that he had known to be noble and beautiful. Inherent in it was something of the shy and shining glory of the spirit.

All too quickly it was done, for he had loved each line he marked.

"There is the picture of a friend I loved," said Charley, as he passed the paper to Watts.

The old man examined it with intense interest. He carried it nearer to the light, and bent down his face close to it.

"Fire!" he muttered, as if he were afraid to trust his voice aloud. "Fire! Fire is here, Peter boy! There is something real in this. I know! I have eyes to see! Where is—how did you get it in here, Peter? This is splendid. Fire! You have it, Peter—I need no better proof than this simple thing, for it has a soul. Who was this man?"

"I did not know his name," replied Charley. "They called him a madman. I know only his initials. They were D. D. D."

When Melodie opened the basement door with her key, and came into the old-fashioned basement room, she found only Charley.

"Oh, Peter!" she cried, her eyes shining with surprise. "I thought you had to be somewhere else to-night. I'm so glad! You old fraud, you!"

He came nearer to her, smiling.

"Where's Uncle Alex?" she demanded.

"That is a mystery," he told her, as he took her hands in his. "Melodie—your hands are cold, and it's warm to-night! What makes your hands so cold, little Melodie?"

She shivered laughingly.

"It's that darned old fountain on the stage," she explained. "If they don't heat that water, I'm going on a strike, I am. It's hell to be a mermaid in cold water! You just try it and see, old trooper!"

"Let me warm you," he said softly, as he drew her to him closely, shutting her to him with arms tender and possessive. "Let me hold you close and keep you warm—always!"

She smiled up at him contentedly.

"I don't mind . . . except for my hat! Let me take my hat off—it's the only good one I've got!"

"A hat on your hair is a sacrilege," he said, as he released her.

"Twenty dollars worth of sacrilege, Peter. There!"

She touched her hair swiftly with those white, elfen fingers; then stood before him, smiling again.

"What's all the mystery about Uncle Alex?" she asked.

He took her hands again and pressed them tightly between his own. The contact made him tremble; there was something so immeasurably dear and desirable about her presence, her nearness, her eyes, her smile, the feel of her hands that for a moment he could not speak.

"Peter! Why do you look at me like that?" she asked.

"I want to warm you!" he said huskily. "I want to warm your soul with mine, Melodie. I—"

Her eyes returned his ardent gaze clearly and frankly.

"Yes, Peter."

"To-night—when we were together in the restaurant—I wanted to tell you, then, Melodie—but somehow, it seemed so unnecessary. I thought—we both understood. Now—I'm so afraid we didn't. I've got to tell you. I want you, Melodie. I—I love you, dear. I want you to be mine—always!"

Her lips were trembling; there were tears in her eyes. Suddenly she seemed to sway and fall against him, burying her head against his coat.

"My little Melodie," he murmured, kissing her hair. "My own, my beautiful one!"

"Oh, Peter," she sobbed. "I'm just a bucolic little fool! I know it! But I'm so happy, Peter. And I'm such a little nobody! I want you so much—forever and ever, Peter—just forever and ever and ever—and I just feel I'm such a little nobody, I'll never be good enough for you. And I do love you, Peter—I smiled at you in the train first because I did. It's just so beautiful——"

He lifted her in his arms; so young, so slim and light and precious. Holding her there, he looked down upon her lovely face; the dreamy, womanly eyes, and the girlish lips to which the shy smile came back gently and with its own dear invitation. The smile filled him with a tender madness. He bent closer, bringing his lips nearer and nearer to her own, until their breathing mingled. The grip of his arms around her grew stronger. Soon their lips came together, while she was still smiling, so that he seemed to snare her smile and hold it prisoned in their kiss.

The old clock on the shelf ticked sedately for full one hour, if not longer; reckoning with its moving hands seconds, minutes, hours. But to Melodie and Charley, seconds,

minutes, hours no longer existed. They had abandoned themselves to love, and while it lasts love is its own eternity.

Still with their first kiss unbroken, he had carried her across the room to the old arm chair. Time fled from them, leaving them to the persistent delirium of that first embrace.

When she drew back at last, it was because the tears had come again.

"Do you love me, my beautiful Melodie?" he murmured.

"I—I would die for you, Peter! I'd gladly die for you!"

"Are you warm now?"

"It's always warm when I'm near you. Stay near me always, and I'll never be cold again—not even in the water! The water is cold, Peter—you must stay near me!"

"I'll never leave you, my beautiful! I shall always be near to warm you! My Aphrodite! My dream girl come true!"

"Say that again, Peter dear! It sounds so beautiful!"

He would have said it again, undoubtedly, if there had not come an interruption. A sudden knocking sounded at the window; an impatient and inquiring tapping, quite peremptory in attack.

"What's that?" gasped Melodie.

"It's your Uncle Alex! I'd forgotten—just a minute!"

He hurried into the street, and Melodie, flushed and wondering, tried to rearrange her wayward hair, while she listened to voices outside the door. Charley came back smiling.

"What is all this about, Peter!" she asked.

He sat down beside her and drew her close again.

"Uncle Alex loves you, Melodie. He didn't believe me when I told him—about our love. He wanted to be sure you really did care. You do, don't you Melodie? . . . Well, then! He agreed to go outside and give us a chance to come to a definite understanding. He's been waiting out there for an hour and when he got too tired, he banged on the window!"

And then he told her of the compact they had made to-

gether, and how the old man hoped to make Charley a great artist, that he might paint a wonderful picture of Melodie.

"Where is he now?" she asked softly.

Charley didn't know. The old man had departed on some mysterious errand.

"And," Charley concluded, "I don't know how long he will be gone, but I want you to kiss me, my beautiful, until he comes back!"

"Suppose he should decide not to come back, Peter?"

"Then I want you to kiss me forever!"

His arms filled with bundles, Uncle Alex finally returned. Without glancing at either Melodie or Charley he carried them silently into a room at the rear. At length he came in to them, and stood holding out his arms to Melodie.

"Come here, little girl," he said.

She ran into his embrace, throwing her arms around his neck and crying like a little child.

"There! Stop it, you!" said the old man. "It's all right! I understand! You're happy and he's happy—and I want you both to understand that I'm happy too! Stop it, now, Melodie!"

She was laughing, while she was crying, as she patted his withered cheeks.

"What's all the surprise?" she asked him.

"You'll see, soon enough. Just you sit there and let me attend to things!"

And while they watched him he attended to things marvelously well. Over the center table he flung a white cloth, and on this he proceeded to set forth a feast. A cold bird, done to a turn by one of the best chefs in America, he explained; two baskets of fruits, tempting salads, cakes and ices.

"And finally—this!" he proclaimed.

The lamplight illuminated his face, as he held aloft a dark bottle, covered with cobweb.

"Port—rare and rich old port!" he crowed. "Blessed with the beeswing of fifty years! It will bring us all—heart's ease."

It was a rare feast. To Charley it was a new and surprising experience, incomparably satisfying. For the first time in his life he had found beautiful realities. Hitherto, everything that he had loved had existed only in his imagination. These joys were actual, tangible, real. He was finding pleasure in physical things. It had begun with his first kiss, pressed on Melodie's lips. She was the one piece of clay in the world worthy of his dreams. All that she touched, she blessed for him and made beautiful to his senses. Until he had kissed her, nothing physical had been holy to him. Her lips were holy. They were as precious as the finest and most ethereal of his fancies. This bread that she broke for him was holy. Spirit was in her lips and in this food.

"Look!" cried Melodie. "Let's make a wish!"

She had found the wishing bone. Charley took one end and she the other, and together they pulled it asunder. The larger half was left in Charley's fingers.

"Your wish will come true, Peter dear!" she reminded him happily. "Tell me what it was?"

"I wished that your wish would come true, my beautiful," he replied. "And what was your wish?"

"That you'd never get tired of bucolic little me," she whispered.

"I was wishing you'd both be happy forever," remarked Uncle Alex, helping himself to a wing of the chicken. "Now, it's about time we talked common sense. We've got to begin right at the beginning. Charley says he is willing to do anything to learn how to paint. Now if any man can teach him what he ought to know, it's your Uncle Alex. But the young man has got to live while he learns—most young men do. So what are we going to do about it? Well, this is what I propose. I've been keeping this little shop here for a long

time . . . Why shouldn't I take Peter on as a clerk? Neither one of us will have too much to do—but I'm well able to afford it, understand—and when we're not busy, I can be teaching him what he wants to learn. He can live right here—and I'll pay him enough to let him take you to the movies once in a while, Melodie. How's that sound?"

"Now, Mr. Watts—" began Charley, in protest.

"Don't you Mr. Watts me," cried Uncle Alex. "That is the thing to do. In three or four years, I'll make a genius out of you, young man, if genius you be. And you'll always be near to Melodie, if you do as I suggest."

Melodie seized the old man's hand gratefully.

"Please do what he says, Peter, dear," she pleaded. "It would make me very happy. Uncle Alex is always right about everything, and I'll never be cold again—with you so near me."

After that, there was no more argument. When Charley finally said good night to Melodie, he returned to his room in Pomander Walk for the last time.

Henceforth, he was to live in the little wooden house, just forty-five seconds from Broadway.

What was the secret of her? Why did he love her, so utterly and so supremely? Was it her smile, her glance, her gentle artlessness? He asked himself the question as he tossed on his bed that night. And then he despised himself for asking it. Why analyze, or seek to isolate his pulsing joyousness? What did it matter? He loved her! He loved her, loved her, loved her! She was his dream girl come true. That was enough.

That night he dreamed of Clara. He thought he saw her, washing the front steps, and saying to herself that life was like this, day in and day out. He woke up, shuddering. For the time of his dream, he had believed himself back in that dreary house, again her husband. Poor Clara. He lay awake

and wondered. Had she ever had a dream? Would it ever come true? There was a tenderness in his musings of her; he would like her to be happy, too.

One great truth came to him before he slept again. All his life, he had been remote from the world around him. He could not approach it, nor had it cared to reach out vain hands to him. Melodie bridged the gulf. She was part of earth and part of dreams, and through their love all things were possible.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

I AM THAT I AM

THERE was no matinée that next afternoon. In the morning Charley had left Pomander Walk, to make his home in a small room upstairs in the little wooden house. Melodie and he went for a walk after lunch; up Riverside Drive until they came to a huge gray boulder, rising sheerly from the park. Upon its rocky eminence, they reached a final understanding of their hearts.

Laughing like children, they clambered to the sharp peak of the boulder, only to grow silent as they looked down the long wet vista of the Hudson, moving under a veil of white mist. Here he told her. Clasping tight her hand, as they sat together, he related the simple history of himself.

"And now I have found you and I want you," he murmured, when all of it was told. "I want you all for myself—forever."

She returned his gaze with sober eyes.

"I do love you, Peter," she said slowly. "And you mustn't misunderstand me. While you talked, I tried to understand you. I couldn't—with my head. I don't know enough to. But I felt it all—here, in my heart. I'm such a nobody, I'm so afraid you'll get tired. If that time ever comes——"

"Melodie!"

"If it ever does, Peter, remember a wedding ring wouldn't matter to me. I would take it off my finger and wear it on a ribbon around my neck, for a remembrance. A ceremony wouldn't mean anything then. Only you would matter—nothing else. But I'll do whatever you want me to do, Peter!"

"Couldn't you come away with me a little while, my beautiful? Couldn't we have—our honeymoon?"

She closed her eyes and sighed.

"That would be heaven, Peter."

Then she opened her eyes widely, shaking his arms and laughing in excitement.

"The show closes next week," she exclaimed. "We can go on our honeymoon then!"

On a remote promontory of the Long Island shore there was an estate, owned by one of the customers of Uncle Alex; a patron who was also a friend. A little house had been built, close to the shore, which the owner lent his friends on their fishing excursions.

To this remote shore, and to this little house, came Charley and Melodie, to spend their week together.

A magistrate had pronounced the foolish words over them; words which neither of them heard, for their hearts were too full for listening to his mumblings. Afterward, they rode across the island in a noisy train, and from the station they were driven to the estate in a hired Ford. But the rest of the way, down the steep hillsides to the sea, they hurried, hand in hand, alone.

They found their little house, and exclaimed over its cozy comfort, and all the evidences of loving thought which Uncle Alex had left there. He had stored its cupboards with food, and its fireplace with logs. All was clean and bright with welcome.

Then, still hand in hand, they left the house and sought the open beach. A fresh wind was blowing; the breakers rode in to the great rocks, green and white and boisterously friendly. In their nostrils was the salt tang of the ocean; the spin-drift wet their faces. Through the orange haze of the retreating sunset sped the sea-gulls, black as silhouettes, utter-

ing harsh sounds as they wheeled and hung with fluttering wings.

The majesty of this desolate display stilled their spirits into reverence. For the first time, Charley stood upon the shore and beheld the ocean. How he had cursed the little bay at home, rimmed with its jealous shores! How he had yearned for the ocean, high, boundless, heaving! Melodie clung to him, like a frightened child.

"Are you cold, little Melodie?" he murmured, stroking her hair.

"Not cold, Peter dear. Maybe I'm frightened!"

"There is nothing for you to be afraid of, darling!"

"The water! It seems to rush at us so, Peter! It is so big and so—so cold, Peter. Keep me close to you, dear—close and warm."

He clasped her to him passionately. How dear she was! How tender, fragile, precious! The orange warmth of the sun was on her face and hair as he kissed her.

He gathered a heap of dry driftwood, and awkwardly coaxed it into a blaze. As a yellow fire leaped upward, crackling gayly, the lavender twilight stole in over them, drenching the sky with dusk. Their voices sank to whispers, and after a while they spoke no more, as she nestled close to him. They listened to the crashing hiss of the waves, like the surf-beat of heart-break on the lonely sands.

She was trembling.

"I'm tired, Peter dear," she murmured.

"Shall we go in, little Melodie?"

"Let me rest my head against your shoulder and close my eyes—and dream!"

In a little while she was asleep. Very close to him he held her, kissing her hands, her hair, her cheeks, so gently that she did not waken. The twilight darkened and it was soon night; the tumbling roar of the waters grew louder,



"There is your autograph, God," he muttered. "I Am That I Am
scrawled in stars."

somehow ominous and threatening. Through the sky came trooping the ancient march of stars.

It was growing colder.

A hush was on his soul; the hush of fear in a moment of great happiness. A man with his woman, facing the dark sea. Something beautiful and terrible wailed in his soul and cried. He gazed up toward the sky, and to his lips unbidden came a prayer.

"There is your autograph, God," he muttered. "There you have written your signature in the silver script of worlds without number. *I Am That I Am* scrawled in stars. I, too, am that I am, oh, Brother God! Let me come close to her and warm her—always!"

He had spoken the words aloud. Melodie stirred and opened her eyes.

"I am cold, Peter dear," she murmured. "Take me into our little house. And kiss me, Peter—this is our wedding night!"

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

YEARS! YEARS! YEARS!

THUS life began all over again for Charley Turner.

It was a different life from anything he had ever conjectured; a life of dreams emerging into realities.

First there was his work in the shop, helping Uncle Alex. This was full of interesting experiences and contact with delightful characters. Modest and retiring though the shop appeared, it received illustrious visitors. Old Alexander Watts was known among collectors as a man with eyes in his head, who occasionally had a good picture to sell. It seemed, too, these collectors prized his friendship quite as much as his artistic judgment.

One of these visitors was a blonde Frenchman whose name was Dessier. Uncle Alex told Charley he was a most distinguished man, whose face was watched intently when he attended an exhibit in Paris. Dessier spoke but indifferent English; thus he and Charley talked but little, but there were long, chattering conversations between the Frenchman and the art dealer.

Toward his young assistant, the attitude of Uncle Alex was that of a guardian of a coming king. He taught Charley to paint, exactly as if he expected of him all that Charley's dreams had promised. These lessons began immediately after the return of Charley and Melodie from their hallowed week by the sea. Melodie had soon signed another contract, and was busy with rehearsals in an elaborate musical show.

Practically all the day Uncle Alex and Charley were alone in the house, and the lessons were interrupted only when customers interfered.

In matters of art Uncle Alex was a free-thinker. He believed in the widest latitude; in letting a pupil grope through various forms until he found the most appropriate medium and method. They had long experiments and demonstrations, and there were days when only the most genuine faith could beat back discouragement. As the months hurried on, these days were less frequent; long intervals separated them; faith was being justified by the evidence of works.

Charley was at heart a Venetian; a color worshiper, and it was along this bright path Uncle Alex finally decided to guide him. With great gusto, the old man talked, days without end, of the glories of the method of Bellini.

“Such brilliancy! Such freedom!” he would exclaim, as he carefully expounded the underpainting in dead color, over which were to be superimposed the bright, transparent glazes. “Ah, Peter! You shall make pictures, burning with the richness of life. Nothing shall bind you, my boy. You shall make your own technique, because you shall be a master!”

Yet Uncle Alex was unsparing in his criticism. In Charley he detected a tendency to bold and vigorous outline; a swift contempt for detail. This he knew to be quite as much a virtue as a vice, but he would not permit his pupil to slight the knowledge of how to paint accurately, in spite of this tendency.

Often they talked of the great conception; the proud picture that was some day to be painted; the Madonna Melodie.

“It will be years, Peter,” Uncle Alex would say, with a determined shake of his head. “Years! Years! Years!”

“Do you like this bucolic existence with a little nobody like me?” Melodie asked him one day.

“It is not bucolic,” he reprimanded her, pinching her chin.

"You don't know what the word means. You heard some one say it, and you like to use it. This is a lotus life, Melodie!"

She smiled at him, as he always loved to have her smile, especially when she did not understand him.

It was a lotus life. His dreams were coming true. After two years under the tutelage of Uncle Alex he knew he was to be an artist. Power armed his wrist and warmed his fingers. He, himself, had changed, even as had his life. His face was calmer, his eyes graver and more kind. In his manner there was less jerky nervousness and impatience; more restraint, more of humanity.

The secret of it all was that he and Melodie were happy. Of that he was certain. In her he found every thirst slaked and every hunger satisfied. Once he said to Uncle Alex:

"She is unceasingly feminine, Uncle Alex. She cannot say or do a thing in discord. It's all natural and womanly. She has a hundred moods, a thousand glances, and every one is purely feminine."

As Charley began to be a more competent artist he took to decorating the walls of their sleeping room. It was a quaint old room, walled with white plaster.

"Let's make this our own Sistine Chapel," he proposed one day. "I'll paint all the pictures for you, my beautiful. What would you like?"

"What you would like, Peter dear?"

He found a curious joy in painting on those old walls. Sometimes he closed his eyes and tried to imagine he was Raphael, or Michael Angelo, on a scaffolding in Rome. From his palette, many of his old dreams came trooping out upon the plaster. Above the bed-post he put a burnoosed brigand, astride a galloping black stallion, racing across a desert of sanded gold. He painted a motley circle, squatting around an Algerian marabout, performing mystic feats in the scarlet market place of the Moulay Idriss. In a panel near the

bureau he painted a pair of serious little angels, playing upon a psaltery.

Melodie loved these pictures. With her elfin fingers she rumpled his hair and told him he was too wonderful to be true. She was thinner than she had been; of late she had been complaining of feeling languid and tired.

It was the next day that Helen Saylor came into the shop. With her was the young poet to whom Charley had been introduced in the dining room of the Onandaga. It happened that Uncle Alex was downtown; Charley and Melodie were in the shop together when Helen and her poet arrived.

The recognition was mutual and instantaneous. For all his poise, Charley felt somewhat flustered. Helen reddened, and although her greeting was casual enough, she, too, was embarrassed. They were there to look at a picture done by one of her friends in the village, but her examination of it was altogether perfunctory.

"You—are working here?" she asked, when Charley had put the picture back in its place.

"Yes," he said.

"You know—Peter—Gensler still remembers your work?"

He nodded briefly, without answering. From the shadows in the back of the room, Melodie was watching. Helen bit her lip; she could not resist turning to glance at the girl at the other side of the room.

She turned and smiled at Charley ingratiatingly.

"Keep on remembering that, Peter," she said dulcetly. "I'm so glad I saw you again."

When she was gone Melodie approached him with alert, clairvoyant eyes.

"Who was she, Peter?" she asked.

He told her, and for a while afterward Melodie was silent. When she did speak there was a catch in her voice.

"She loves you, Peter. I saw it. A woman always knows such things. She does love you, Peter!"

"Nonsense, my beautiful!"

"Peter, she does! Have you ever cared for her—even a little bit?"

"Not even a little bit!"

"But suppose—suppose something should happen to me, sometime—now stop, dear—anything might happen, you know, a taxi, or——"

"My darling!"

"It's only supposing, Peter. Do you think you could ever—later——"

"Foolish and jealous little beautiful!"

"Kiss me, Peter dear. And warm me. I'm cold!"

He loved her madly! Art and woman; he had found them together. This was the reward of once having rejected a sordid compromise. As he would think upon these wonders a bright gleam would shine in his eyes. For the preservation of these dreams come true, he would have endured with a laugh the agony of Stephen stoned, of the Bab with the burning candles stuck in holes cut in his breasts.

Melodie, too, was growing; unfolding toward the beauty he showed her like the late blossoming of a rose. Together they went on long walks in the country, through patches of woods where the brown box-elders, the maples stripped of their ashen leaves, the smooth gray bark of the beeches and the sturdy live oaks waited patiently for the spring. In an unhappy little opera called "Lodoletta" they heard Caruso sing; once they attended an afternoon of chamber music by the Zoellners playing in Aeolian Hall, where Melodie liked especially well a jocund Haydn quartet.

It was curious that in all the hard and earnest effort of these learning years he was never really discouraged, though progress was often dishearteningly slow. Uncle Alex and Melodie believed in him, triumphing with him before accomplishment, which is great faith.

It was now almost four years since he had come to live in

the little wooden house, and at last Uncle Alex said to him:

"Peter, my son, give me your hand. Your novitiate is at an end. To-day you may begin to paint your Madonna Melodie."

His conception of womanhood as Venus and Madonna was a revolutionary idea. Charley intended its expression to be more daring still. Through the long years of apprenticeship the design for the painting had burned itself deeper into his soul, so that now, when he was ready to undertake it, the scheme was fixed and clear.

He would paint a nude Madonna.

Hitherto artists had wrapped her holy form in purple swathings, velvet robes laced with gold, veils and wimples and blasphemous skirts. This heresy he would end; her exquisite body was to be a true image of the divine.

Clasped in her arms, a veil around its form, would nestle the child of love. This mothering embrace would be portrayed after the remembrance of a long ago vespers in the ward of the hospital for crippled children. Yet the pose of the body, graceful, rising and trembling in a still dance of love, would be taken from the recollection of the night he had beheld her, lifted in the fountain.

He intended that all his sense of beauty and of reverence for woman should be conveyed in this painting. The figure of the woman would stand forth eloquently against a background of deep and languorous tones. The red hair would fall over her white shoulders and arms that held the infant in a halo of living fire. Her violet eyes would gaze down adoringly, and all the meaning and all the mystery of the picture would be completed in the smile of her parted lips.

Before them waited months of patient toil; of unceasing inspiration. As he thought of those waiting months, Charley was filled with dread. Melodie was ill. For her sake, he

would willingly have abandoned the picture. She was dearer to him than anything else in the world. A blight had seemed to overtake her; when, on that first day, she posed before him in their attic studio, it seemed to him as if there was something ethereal and unearthly upon her beautiful body; an impalpable loveliness.

"You are not strong enough," he said. "I cannot let you tire yourself, my beautiful. We must wait."

To his astonishment, she broke into a torrent of weeping. She was strong enough! She would let him know when she was tired.

He gave in to her, as he always did, but not until she agreed to see a physician. That very night Charley brought a doctor to the house. He asked odd questions, made mysterious probings and computations. Later, outside the basement door, he told Charley his diagnosis.

"Pernicious anaemia. Hard to combat. Rest and good food. But we may pull her through. I think it would be better to let her have her way about the posing. Happiness is a great medicine, no matter what the pathology."

From that moment onward, Charley Turner lived and loved and worked always in fear. He tried not to allow Melodie to know this, but often she asked him why he was so quiet; why there was a shadow in his eyes. At such times he would fold her to him, straining her dear body against his own, and her elfin fingers would rumple his hair, as she would whisper:

"What's the matter, Peter dear? Don't you love me any more?"

The picture grew beneath his eager hands; the progress was steady; as the weeks passed into months it seemed to be coming alive. Both Melodie and Uncle Alex were enthusiastic. The old man watched it, practically every spare moment that he had. He refused to permit Charley to work in the shop, insisting that he must concentrate now upon his great dream.

Once he brought Dessier up the little, winding stairs and the two of them exclaimed together in French, and chattered volubly. When Dessier left, Uncle Alex lit his pipe and smoked valorously, as if he had cause for immense and secret pleasure.

Then came a most unexpected discouragement.

Charley found it impossible to paint Melodie's smile. Almost until the last he had waited, because he felt that bound up in her swift, elusive smile was all the symbolism of the picture. Now he found that the smile constantly evaded him. It seemed too swift for capture. When he attempted to fix it on the canvas, the result was inevitably a despoliation of it all—a wooden smile, altogether unworthy.

After many failures, he was ready to despair.

"I know why it is," said Melodie soothingly. "It's all my fault, Peter. I've got to learn how to hold the smile long enough for you to catch it!"

"I am afraid you can't, my beautiful," he replied. "Your smile is like a butterfly, hovering over your flower-like lips. Who can hold a butterfly?"

She was lying on the bed, very tired. The figure-posing was long since ended, and now she was lying down almost constantly. Her paling cheeks and weary eyes filled Charley with terror.

"Peter dear," she said, "I'm a different girl now from the tough little kid you met on the train, am I not? I've changed a lot. I'm a better girl in a great many ways—but I'm sick, and that's hell, Peter. I feel so ashamed when I look at your picture. Just since you started to paint I've got so thin. My legs are a sight—my body's all wasted away. It isn't like what it was when you saw me coming up in the water, is it, Peter? Oh, Peter dear, do you love me as much now as you did then?"

He clasped her to him crushingly.

"You'll be more beautiful than ever before, my own beau-

tiful one," he murmured brokenly. "Strength and health will come back to you, and all your rosy loveliness. But I love you as you are—more and more with each breath I draw, my own, my beautiful one."

She laughed lightly.

"Now I can smile again," she said. "Get your brush and try to catch the butterfly!"

He tried, but, as always, in vain. Day followed day, and week followed week, and the picture remained unfinished. Uncle Alex sought vainly to advise him. They had reached an extraordinary *impasse*.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

COLD!

ONE day Uncle Alex spoke to Charley seriously.

"I have been talking to Dessier," the old man said. "He has seen your picture. I cannot begin to convey to you the man's enthusiasm. He understands your difficulty, and he said to me frankly that he believed that was the one obstacle in the path of a world masterpiece."

Charley nodded apathetically. He was thinking of Melodie.

"Now," continued Uncle Alex, "Dessier's word on a matter of that kind, Peter, is of immense importance. Did you know that Dessier is one of the judges in the new French cathedral competition? Surely I told you that? They are holding a world-wide competition for a picture to go in a panel of a restored French cathedral that was nearly blown to ruins in the war. Do you know what Dessier said to me? He said your picture might win that prize!"

"No church would ever accept such a picture," said Charley.

"In France? Certainly!" declared Uncle Alex. "There are people in France with eyes, my son."

"Even so, I cannot finish the picture. My heart is breaking slowly into little pieces. I cannot paint her smile."

"I was leading up to that," resumed Uncle Alex. "I am inclined to think, Peter, that it is because your heart is breaking that you have done so astoundingly well so far. I know you are worried about Melodie. Do you think I am not wor-

ried, too? But I have not lost hope—not for her health, and not for your picture!"

"What do you mean, Uncle Alex?"

"The doctor told me something the other day which set me thinking. He said a long voyage at sea would probably make her well, when everything else had failed. Peter, I am afraid we have no time for delay. You must not mind the actions of an impetuous old man—but I have taken the trouble to arrange a long sea voyage for the two of you—and you sail this week."

"Uncle Alex! How—"

"Never mind. There is a slow boat, which does not reach France until the end of a three weeks' voyage. Just the thing for you both. It is not a passenger ship, but the captain sometimes takes a few. You will be the only passengers on board. I have hired a cabin for you and Melodie; a room with a north light, my boy, and I am sure that you will have finished the picture with the smile you want, long before you reach the other side."

"Uncle Alex—"

"A word more. Dessier has returned to Paris. Promise me, Peter, that when you reach there you will find him and turn over your picture to the competition. And think, Peter! You will show Melodie Paris!"

Charley caught the old man's hand in a close grip. He could not speak, but both of them understood.

Uncle Alex stood on the dock, waving to them pathetically with his handkerchief, as the ship slipped out into the river and put to sea.

Melodie cried, as she waved back to him. She tried to be bright; tried to share in the excitement which Charley sought to evoke in her. Her pretense was brave, but he saw through it.

"You must rest, now, my beautiful," he said, as they stood

together, with the sunset behind them and the deepening purple of the ocean night beyond. "To-morrow, and all the days after, you shall sit in a deck-chair, covered with warm blankets and——"

"You'll talk to me, Peter?"

"I'll tell you of beautiful things, little Melodie."

Uncle Alex had personally supervised the packing of the picture, and its subsequent uncrating. Thus Charley found it set up carefully, and near it all that he would need to finish it, if he could.

In the days that followed Charley and Melodie spent their very happiest hours. Their communion was perfect. Long hours of silence, broken only by the pressure of hands, and the meeting of loving eyes. Sweet confidences and the sharing of a rich understanding. His arm was her pillow at night, and the wash of the waters their lullaby.

The rough sailors delighted to talk with her, and the captain worshiped her. One morning he came into their cabin, where Charley was again struggling to capture her smile. The seaman, rough and untutored man that he was, bowed his head before the picture.

But the smile was quite as elusive on sea as on shore. A week after they were out Charley spent one entire afternoon, while Melodie lay on the bed, coaxing the smile back to her mouth again and again, with a mad and desperate jesting.

At length he put down his brush with a groan.

"I am a brute," he cried. "Here I've been making you work all afternoon. It has——"

"I don't mind, Peter," she said. "It's cold outside—the wind is blowing this afternoon. I think a storm is coming. Wouldn't it be just terrible if we got sea-sick? It's warm in here."

"Just the same, there will be no more work for twenty-four hours, my darling. You've gone on a strike, that's all. For the next twenty-four hours you are to smile just for me, and

not for my picture. And now, do you know what I am going to do?"

"What, Peter dear?"

"I am going down to see the cook. I'm going to give the cook orders. And when I come upstairs, I'm going to have a feast on a tray that will make you well and strong again, just to look at it."

"Dear Peter," she murmured. "I'm tired now. I think I'll take a nap—if you promise to wake me up when you come back."

He stood smiling in the doorway.

"By-by!" he called.

"*Au revoir, old trooper!*" she murmured drowsily.

He had a long and confidential talk with the cook, a big man who had a daughter at home who wasn't strong either. Indeed, and he would be glad to make something special for the little lady. Charley sat in the warm galley and chatted with the man, until more than an hour passed, and the tray, dainty with silver and napery, was ready.

The ship was rolling as he ascended the companion-way. Melodie's storm was truly on the way. He balanced himself against the wall, as he held the tray tightly with one hand, and opened their cabin door with the other.

Inside it was dark. Dusk, intensified by storm clouds, filled the little room with shadows. Very carefully, he set down the tray, and then stepped softly to the bed. She was lying very still, her hands clasped over her heart, her face turned toward the canvas in its frame.

He bent down and kissed her.

"Wake up, my beautiful!" he called. "Wake up!"

Her lips were cold. He touched her hands. They, too, were cold. Limp and cold.

A horrible fear paralyzed him.

"Melodie!" he cried gaspingly. "Wake up, Melodie!"

She did not stir. His face twisted with agony, he knelt

down and put his ear against her heart. Cold—silent and cold.

“Melodie!” he screamed. “Oh, my lost one, my beautiful! My beautiful!”

From the bow to the stern of the rolling ship they heard the echo of his wailing voice. Shriller than the winds it cried. The captain came, and presently the ship’s doctor. He made a futile gesture with his hairy hands.

Mercifully they left him alone with her. Alone, as the blackness of night and storm filled the cabin and blotted out everything.

Dear white, cold hands! Dear violet eyes that see no more! Venus is dead!

“Where are you now?” his spirit was crying. “Where are you now, my lost, my beautiful one?”

Uncounted and unnumbered, the hours passed. Kissing the white cold hands, kissing each slim and elfin finger that so often had rumpled his hair, whispering all his heart-break as he kissed her cold cheeks, he did not know how long the hours were.

Heart-break! Heart-break! Words like the surf-beat on a desolate shore. Cold! Cold! Cold! He had promised to be near her always, to warm her always.

“Never leave me, Peter. It’s always warm when you are near me.”

Oh, God!

“*Au revoir, old trooper!*”

Oh, God!

The storm was passing. The roll of the ship lessened, as through the wrack of angry cloud the moonlight came and bided with him. Its silver messenger came through the partly opened window; it crept across the floor and climbed up the side of the bed, until at last it lay as a dream-light on her face.

Melodie had died with a smile!

There it was, the fugitive and elusive smile, fixed in death upon her parted lips. For the broken-hearted dreamer she was smiling now; the butterfly was snared, and still and beautiful.

A gasp of agony came from his throat. Sobbing, he stumbled to his feet. Down his cheeks were coursing tears. They wet his brush, as with a few, swift darting strokes across the painted lips upon the canvas, he gave them their smile and made the figure a living reality.

The fugitive mystery was fixed and sealed upon her lips. As the artist fell forward beside the still form of his vanished dream girl, the Madonna Melodie was smiling at last.

The ship was two weeks from land.

He must understand that. The captain reminded him of the fact, with kindly and apologetic gestures. The others shook their heads in solemn confirmation.

The ship was two weeks from land.

He must understand that. There was no other way. It was the law of the sea.

They led him off for a while, that he might not see what they were about. After a while, they brought him to the deck. All the crew was assembled there, with bared heads, and some of the men were weeping. Something was lying upon an improvised bier—a gray and wretched object, wrapped in canvas, tied up and corded and bandaged, and weighted with iron weights so that it would sink when lowered into the sea.

The captain had a book. It was a black book, of pebbled leather, with thin leaves trimmed in gilt. The captain was reading out of the book, but Charley heard the words as whispers; his heart was throbbing out its own bleak ritual.

“—that is born of woman is of a few days and full of trouble,” read the captain sonorously.

But Charley's heart was throbbing:

"My beautiful! My lost one!"

"—cometh forth like a flower and is cut down; fleeth also as a shadow and continueth not."

Where are you now, my beautiful, my lost one?

"Forasmuch as it hath pleased Almighty God, in His wise providence, to take out of the world the soul of His deceased servant, we, therefore, commit her body to the deep——"

The water is so cold, my beautiful, my lost one!

"—looking for the general resurrection, when the earth and the sea shall give up their dead."

Au revoir, my beautiful, my lost one!

"Almighty God, our Heavenly Father, who in Thy perfect wisdom and mercy hast ended for Thy servant departed, the voyage of her troublous life, grant we beseech Thee, who are still to continue our course——"

Down! Down! Down!

Cold waves! Cold waves! Cold waves!

Ah, little Melodie, who shall warm you now?

Aphrodite is at the bottom of the sea!

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

MR. STRICKER'S BEST ORIGINAL

"I WANT to see Mr. Peter Gaunt—personally."

The person who wished to see Mr. Peter Gaunt personally was a portly, gray-haired man of manifest importance, who stood in the little office outside the studio, hat in hand, rising and falling elegantly on his toes.

The young woman at the desk nodded pleasantly.

"Mr. Gaunt is engaged at the moment. Did you have an appointment?"

The visitor shook his head.

"When I want to see a big man, I never make an appointment," he explained. "I just walk right in. In my career in business, I've always found that was the way to do it, if you really wanted to see your man."

"Well, then, would you mind waiting? I don't suppose I could help you."

The portly, gray-haired man laughed bushily, and tugged at his walrus mustaches.

"No, miss," he said, almost overcome with mirth. "No, I'm afraid you can't help me. I deal with principals. Only with principals. I have never dealt with any one in my business career *except* principals—do that and life will always yield you ten per cent interest."

The girl laughed.

"That's a new one," she flattered.

"An original," conceded the visitor, blandly. "How long have you been working for Mr. Gaunt?"

"About two years—ever since he returned from Europe."

"Well. I guess he finds you a great help. I admire that, young lady. Stick to one job, and one job will stick to you. It must be wonderful to work for a great man like Mr. Peter Gaunt."

"Mr. Gaunt is wonderful to every one!"

"I saw the picture that made him famous three years ago—hanging in a cathedral on the other side. I took my wife and my boy Henry on a tour over there. Great place, Europe. Great place. But the good old U. S. A. for me every time. Yes, sir! I don't know anything better to make a man a hundred per cent American than a tour to Europe. But I'll never forget Mr. Gaunt's picture. I had heard so much about it; the whole country was talking, you remember. It was pretty, all right—but—you know——"

"Were you shocked at the idea of a nude Madonna?"

"Well, I don't know. There wasn't anything shocking in the picture—even my boy Henry said that. He teaches a class in Sunday school. It's high art, I guess. Down where I come from there ain't much high art. What sort of looking man is Mr. Gaunt—they say he won't have his picture printed?"

"He's a nice looking man."

"Does he always paint these——"

"Nudes? No, sir. The Madonna Melodie is the only nude he ever painted. Artists are strange, you know."

"Is he—temperamental?"

"Not at all. He is the most gentle and considerate man I ever knew. He says very little to any one, but his eyes are so kind. Mr. Gaunt is just wonderful. And he paints wonderful things now—beautiful murals for public buildings."

"That's why I am here," confided the visitor. "I am a committee of one, empowered to act!"

"Really!"

"Yes, sir. Down where I come from, we're putting up a new Civic Improvement Building. There will be nothing like

it on the Atlantic Seaboard. The city voted on a loan to build it and the loan passed with a big majority. Oh, we're wide awake down there. Yes, sir. I was put on the committee, and I suggested that the mural decorations in the lobby of our new Civic Improvement Building ought to be done by the biggest man in the business. Everybody knows who that is, I said—Peter Gaunt. Now I am known down home as the original Peter Gaunt man. So here I am. I want Mr. Gaunt to do those mural decorations—I want his name on the dotted line. Money is no object with me; the city treasury is going to foot this bill."

"If you will give me your name, I will ask Mr. Gaunt to see you now."

The portly man gave her a card, engraved in red lettering: "John Stricker, Esquire; president Atlass Brush Co., Strickly Stricker Brushes."

With the card in her hand, the girl passed into the studio, but before the door closed behind her, John Stricker's foot had intercepted, and he walked in.

"Excuse me, Mr. Gaunt," he boomed, "if I walk right in here like this, I'm a man of——"

He stopped and stared. His jaw dropped and his eyes widened in stupefied astonishment. He groaned throatily, bushily, and crushed his hat between his hands.

"You—you—" he gasped. "You——"

The artist, who had been standing by the easel, turned and looked him frankly in the eyes. He was red-haired, but with gray tufts among his wild locks; his blue eyes were filled with a settled resignation. The boyish cast of his face seemed at variance with the deep lines there. A flicker of surprise glowed in his blue eyes.

"Good afternoon, Mr.——"

He paused, his inflection inquiring, as he glanced at the card.

"Good afternoon, Mr. John Stricker."

"I must—I must speak with you alone," faltered Mr. Stricker.

The girl went through the door obediently, closing it behind her.

"Charley Turner!" gasped Mr. Stricker reprovingly.

"Forgive me, Mr. Stricker? I don't think I understand."

"You were dead. We buried you. We spent your insurance money on a granite tombstone, carved with a verse. My God!"

"You are puzzling me, Mr. Stricker. Are you quite well?"

"Don't talk like that to me, Charley Turner. You understand, all right. Think I wouldn't know you? I'm the one don't understand. You're my son-in-law—and my son-in-law is dead!"

"Then why not let him lie in his grave content, Mr. Stricker?"

"You are dead! That is, you were dead," expostulated Mr. Stricker. "Now you're alive! I see you and I know who you are. You are Charley Turner, the man——"

"You railroaded into an asylum," said Charley evenly. "But that man did die, Mr. Stricker. You should not disinter him. Let him rot. A new man has taken his place—that is all."

"Charley, you don't know how serious this is. Do you realize what has happened?"

"I shall never be able to realize that."

"Clara is married. She married Mr. Harris, the insurance man."

"And now you are afraid Clara is a bigamist?"

"Charley! Don't!"

"You are afraid she is a bigamist," insisted Charley calmly. "A Baptist bigamist."

"Please don't talk like that, Charley. You don't understand. They have two innocent little children."

"And you are afraid they are——"

"*Don't!*"

"Baptist——"

"Don't you dare!"

John Stricker pulled out his handkerchief and plucked at his eyes fumblingly.

"Charley," he said, "I don't know where I am or what has happened to me. I didn't come up here for nothing like this. I came up here on a business matter. Now the world seems to be all turned upside down, when everything was going so nice. A real man will show his mettle in a crisis. No man must lose his head when trouble comes. The man that's worth while is the man with a smile. But I—I—can I sit down?"

Charley made haste to offer him a chair.

"Cheer up, Mr. Stricker," he said. "If there is trouble, you will make it yourself. You believe Clara is living in adultery."

"A man must stick to what he believes to be honest and right," replied Mr. Stricker positively. "And yet I don't know what is right now and what ain't. Charley, you won't be sore when I say to you, here and now, that you led my daughter Clara one awful life. I saw that child—she's my child and I love her—getting thin and sick and fighting mad all the time. She wasn't born like that. You made her like that. Now she's married to a good, God-fearing, sober, Christian man. They've got two innocent little children that take after me. I don't want Clara's heart broken. She sings all the time, now, and she's getting stout. And now this——"

Charley came over and put his hand on the shoulder of old John Stricker.

"If you bring me back from the pit where you buried me," he said solemnly, "you will break her heart. No one can ever know the truth, unless you speak."

The old man sat suddenly erect.

"May the good Lord forgive me for it," he said, "but I think I'd rather go to hell than break up Clara's home."

Charley eyed him keenly. He was older; pathetically older. Poor old devil! Putting his immortal soul in jeopardy to save his daughter from tears! There *was* something beautiful in old John Stricker.

He got up with something of an air of restored importance.

"You know," he said, "I came up here to get Peter Gaunt to do a job for us down home. But now—of course! . . . Wait a minute!"

His eyes had lighted up with a sudden gleam of wonder.

"Is this the room where you paint?" he asked huskily.

"Yes."

The old man was trembling with excitement as he approached the easel. He bent over, staring hard at something; when he looked up, his face was aglow.

"Charley," he said accusingly, "you hurt my feelings once. You criticized my factory. I remember every word you said. You said there wasn't any dream in my factory. You said you wouldn't mind being a shoe clerk, but you hated my factory. Brushes! Dirt! You remember that?"

Charley nodded.

"And yet, look here!"

He seized a brush and waved it triumphantly over his head.

"You paint your pictures with a Strickly Stricker brush!" he shouted.

Charley clapped his hands and laughed. He had never even so much as glanced at the trade-mark that had once been so familiar.

"Mr. Stricker," he said. "I ask your forgiveness. This is your latest and very best original."

The old man eyed him aslant.

"Would you—give me a testimonial for these brushes?" he asked breathlessly.

"I will!"

Mr. Stricker crossed his hands over his stomach with something like his old assurance.

"I am going to advertise those brushes as they were never advertised before!" he promised himself. "Endorsed by Peter Gaunt, the great artist! I am going to have them trademarked——"

After a while he was gone. Charley sat for a long time lost in musings. His secretary bade him good-night . . . words . . . words . . .

He was alone. Moments—hours.

The quick evening of the autumn rushed in through the open window, scattering cold drops of rain. A shiver ran through him: on the back of his hand had spattered cold water.

His soul was cold.

He closed the window and turned back to the desk. Shadows and mystery and the silence of insistent loneliness.

He lighted the desk lamp.

He was warm; there was light!

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